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Mrs. Mean

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I call her Mrs. Mean. I see her, as I see her husband and each of her four children, from my porch, or sometimes when I look up from my puttering, or part my upstairs window curtains. I can only surmise what her life is like inside her little house; but on humid Sunday afternoons, while I try my porch for breeze, I see her hobbling on her careful lawn in the hot sun, stick in hand to beat her scattered children, and I wonder a lot about it.

I don't know her name. The one I've made to mark her and her doings in my head is far too abstract. It suggests the glassy essence, the grotesquerie of Type; yet it's honestly come by, and in a way, it's flattering to her, as if she belonged on Congreve's stage. She could be mean there without the least particularity, with the formality and grandeur of Being, while still protected from the sour and acrid community of her effect, from the full sound and common feel of life; all of which retain her, for me, on her burning lawn, as palpable and loud and bitter as her stinging switch.

I may have once said something to her—a triviality—and perhaps once more than that, while strolling, I may have nodded to her or I may have smiled. . . . though not together. I have forgotten.

When I bought my house I wished, more than anything, to be idle, idle in the supremely idle way of nature; for I felt then that nature produced without effort, in the manner of digestion and breathing. The street is quiet. My house is high and old, as most of the others are, and spreading trees shade my lawn and arch the pavement. Darkness is early here at any time of year. The old are living their old age out, shawled in shadows, cold before fires. A block away they are building stores. One feels the warmth that is the movement of decay. I see the commercial agent. He wears gold rings. His hand partitions. Lamps will grow in these unlucky windows. Wash will hang from new external stairs. No one has his home here but myself; for I have chosen to be idle, as I said, to surround myself with scenes and pictures; to conjecture, to rest my life upon a web of theory—as ready as the spider is to mend or suck dry intruders. While the street is quiet, the houses whole, their windows shaded; while the aged sit their porches and swap descriptions of their health; the Means, upon the opportunity of death, have seized the one small house the neighborhood affords. Treeless and meager, it stands in the summer in a pool of sun and in the winter in a blast of air.

My house has porches fore and aft and holds a corner. I spy with care and patience on my neighbors but I seldom speak. They watch me too, of course, and so I count our evils even, though I guard my conscience with a claim to scientific coldness they cannot possess. For them no idleness is real. They see it, certainly. I sit with my feet on the rail. My wife rocks by me. The hours pass. We talk. I dream. I sail my boats on their seas. I rest my stories on their backs. They cannot feel them. Phantoms of idleness never burden. If I were old or sick or idiotic, if I shook in my chair or withered in a southern window, they would understand my inactivity, and approve; but even the wobblers make their faithful rounds. They rake their leaves. They mow and shovel. They clip their unkempt hedges and their flowers. Their lives are filled by this. I do no more.

Mrs. Mean, for instance: what could she think? She is never idle. She crowds each moment with endeavor.

When I had my cottage I used to see, on Sabbaths, a wire-haired lady drive her family to the beach. She rented everything. Her family dressed in the car, the windows draped with blankets, while the lady

in her jacket rapped on the hood for speed, then rushed them to the surf. She always gestured grandly at the sea and swung a watch by its strap. "So much money, so much time, let us amuse," she always said, and sat on a piece of driftwood and shelled peas. The children dabbled at the water with their fingers. Her husband, a shriveled, mournful soul, hung at the water's edge and slowly patted his wrists with ocean. Inertia enraged her. She thrust her pods away, pouring her lap in a jar. "Begin, begin," she would shout then, jumping up, displaying the watch. The children would squat in the sand until foam marked their bottoms, staring in their pails. Papa would drip water to his elbows and upper arm while mama receded to her log. The children fought then. It began invisibly. It continued silently, without emotion. They kicked and bit and stabbed with their shovels. When she found them fighting she would empty her lap and start up, shaking the watch and shouting, but the children fought on bitterly, each one alone, throwing sand and swinging their pails, rolling over and over on the beach and in and out of the moving ocean. She ran toward them but the sea slid up the sand and drove her off, squealing on tiptoe, scuffing and denting the smooth sand. The children plunged into the surf and broke apart. "Don't lose your shovels!" The waves washed the children in. They huddled on dark patches of beach. At last their mother would run among them, quickly, between breaths of ocean, and with her hands on her hips, her legs apart, she would throw her head back in the mimic of gargantuan guffaws, soundless and shaking. "Laugh," she would say then, "there is only an hour."

The people by me primitively guess that I am enemy and hate me: not alone for being different, or disdaining work, or worse, not doing any; but for something that would seem, if spoken for them, words of magic; for I take their souls away—I know it—and I play with them; I puppet them up to something; I march them through strange crowds and passions; I snuffle at their roots.

From the first they saw me watching. I can't disguise my interest. They expected, I suppose, that I would soon be round with stories. I would tell Miss Matthew of Mr. Wallace, and Mr. Wallace of Mrs. Turk, and Miss Matthew and Mr. Wallace and Mrs. Turk would take the opportunity to tell me all they knew of one another, all they knew about diseases, all they thought worthy of themselves and could remember of their relatives, and the complete details of their many associations with violent forms of death. But when I communicated nothing to them; when I had nothing,

in confidence, to say to anyone; then they began to treat my eyes like marbles and to parade their lives indifferently before me, as if I were, upon my porch, a motionless, graven idol, not of their religion, in my niche; yet I somehow retained my mystery, my potency, so that the indifference was finally superficial and I fancy they felt a compulsion to be observed—*watched* in all they did. I should say they dread me as they dread the supernatural. How Mr. Wallace dreads it, dead as he nearly is, twisted on his cane. Every morning, when he can, he comes down the block past my porch, his left arm hung like a shawl from his shoulder, shuffling his numb feet, poking cracks. "I'll have to go back." His voice is hoarse and loud. "I used to walk to the end of the street." He mops his face and dries his running eyes. "Hot," he shouts, propped against his cane. "Last summer I went to the end." The cane comes out of his belly. He sways. Will he die like this? palsy seize him? sweat break before that final clip of pain and his surprise? The cane will gouge cement. His hat will float into my privet hedge and the walk drive blood from his nose.

He turns at last and I relax. His eyes are anxious for a friend to cry at, to bellow to a stop. He squints up the street, and if, by any chance, someone appears, Mr. Wallace grins and howls hello. He inches forward, pounds the walk, roars reports of weather for the middle of the night. "Know what it was at one? Eighty-seven. June, not hell we're in, but eighty-seven. I ain't even eighty-seven. There was a cloud across the moon at two. It rained alongside five but nothing cooled." And the dawn was gray as soapy water. Fog lay between garages. A star, almost hidden by the morning light, fell past the Atlas stack and died near Gemini. The friend is fixed and Mr. Wallace closes, his face inflamed, his eyeballs rolling. He describes the contours of his aches, the duration, strength, and quality of every twinge, the subtle nuances of vague internal hurts. He distinguishes blunt pains from sharp, pale ones from bright, wiry from watery, morning, night. His brown teeth grin. Is it better, he discourses, to suffer when it's hot or when it's cold, while standing or sitting, reading or walking, young or old?

"I say it's better to be cold. You'll say not. I know what you'll say. You'll say, 'the knuckle, now, if rapped when cold, will ring.' I know. A cold shin on the sharp, hard edge of something—that's a real one. I know. Never mind. Hurts are all fires. Keep you warm. Know those fellows like that fellow in a book I read about? His name was Scott. You know him? Froze. Scott. If I'd been with him, freezing, I'd of

pounded on me some great sore so when I hit it I would burn all over. Keep you warm. Say, they didn't think of that, did they? Froze. I read about it. I read a lot, except for seeing, or I would. Half an hour. I used to, all the time. My eyes burn through. Your eyes burn sometimes? Scott. Froze. Hey, you know freezing's quiet. Ha! You know—it's warm!"

Mr. Wallace wavers on his stick and spits. The whole street echoes with him. His friend dwindles.

Portents are next. They follow pain as pain the weather. Anyone is a friend of Mr. Wallace who will stay.

The starfall past the Atlas stack—a cruel sign. They are all bad, the signs are. Evil is above us. "Evil's in the air we breathe or we would live forever." Mr. Wallace draws the great word out as he's doubtless heard his preacher. The cane rises with difficulty. The tip waves above the treetops. "There," bellows Mr. Wallace, his jowls shaking. "There!" And he hurls the cane like a spear. "Smoke, sonny, comes out and hides the sky and poisons everything. I've got a cough." His hand is tender on his chest. He taps with it. He hacks, and stumbles. Spit bubbles on the walk and spreads. The friend or friendly stranger bobs and smiles and flees while Mr. Wallace waits, expecting the return of his cane. "I can't bend," he almost whispers, peering at the disappearing back. His smile stays, but the corners of his mouth twitch. Wearily his eyes cross.

"Cane cane cane," Mr. Wallace calls. His wife hurries. "Cane cane," Mr. Wallace calls. She waves her hankie. "Cane," he continues until it's handed back. "Hot." Mrs. Wallace nods and mops his brow. She settles his hat and smooths his sleeve. "You threw your cane again," she says. Mr. Wallace grows solemn. "I tried to kill a squirrel, pumpkin." Mrs. Wallace leads him home, her face in tears.

What a noise he makes! I thought I couldn't stand it when I came. His puffed face frightened me. His eyes were holes I fell in. I dodged his shadow lest it cover me, and felt a fool. He's not so old, sixty perhaps; but his eyes run, his ears ring, his teeth rot. His nose clogs. His lips pale and bleed. His knees, his hips, his neck and arms, are stiff. His feet are sore, the ankles swollen. His back, head and legs ache. His throat is raw, his chest constricted, and all his inner organs—heart, liver, kidneys, lungs, and bowels—are weak. Hands shake. His hair is falling. His flesh lies slack. His cock I vision shriveled to a string, and each breath of life he draws dies as it enters his nose and crosses his tongue. But Mr. Wallace has a strong belly. It is taut and smooth

and round, like a baby's, and anything that Mr. Wallace chooses to put into it mashes up speedily, for Mr. Wallace, although he seeps and oozes and excretes, has never thrown up in his life.

I could hear him walking. That was worst. When I raked the yard I faced in his direction and went in when I saw him coming. With all my precautions his voice would sometimes boom behind me and I would jump, afraid and furious. His moist mouth gaped. His tongue curled over his bent brown teeth. I knew what Jonah felt before the whale's jaws latched. Mr. Wallace has no notion of the feelings he creates. I swear he stinks of fish on such occasions. I feel the oil. It's a tactile nightmare, an olfactory dream—as if my smell and touch divided from my hearing, taste, and vision, and while I watched his mouth and listened to its greeting, fell before whales in Galilee, brine stung and bruised while the fish smell grew as it must grow in the mouth of a whale, and the heat of an exceptionally hardy belly rose around.

It grew upon me that my budding world was ruined if he were free in it. As a specimen Mr. Wallace might be my pride. Glory to him in a jar. But free! Better to release the sweet moving tiger or the delicate snake, the monumental elephant. I was just a castaway to be devoured. It was bad luck and I rocked and I cursed it. Mr. Wallace spouted and I paced the porch with Ahab's anger and his hate. Mrs. Mean wanted my attention. She passed across my vision, brilliant with energy, like the glow of a beacon. Each time my stomach churned. Her children tumbled like balls on the street, like balls escaping gloves and bats; and on the day the boy Toll raced in front of Mr. Wallace like a bolting cat and swung around a sapling like a rock at the end of a string, deadly as little David, then I saw how. Well, that's all over now. Mr. Wallace dreads me as the others do. He inches by. He looks away. He mumbles and searches the earth with his cane. When Mr. Wallace completes his death they will wind crepe around his cane and stick it in his grave. Mrs. Wallace will stand by to screech and I shall send—what shall I send?—I shall send begonias with my card. I say good morning Mr. Wallace, how did you pass the night? and Mr. Wallace's throat puffs with silence. I cannot estimate how much this pleases me. I feel I have succeeded to the idleness of God.

Except in the case of Mrs. Mean. I am no representative of preternatural power. I am no image, on my porch—no symbol. I don't exist. However I try, I cannot, like the earth, throw out invisible lines to trap her instincts; turn her north or south; fertilize or not her busy

womb; cause her to exhibit the tenderness, even, of ruthless wild things for her wild and ruthless brood. And so she burns and burns before me. She revolves her backside carefully against a tree.

2

Mrs. Mean is hearty. She works outside a good bit, as she is doing now. Her pace is furious, and the heat does not deter her. She weeds and clips her immaculate yard, waging endless war against the heels and tricycles of her children. She rolls and rakes. She plants and feeds. Does she ever fall inside her house, a sprung hulk, and lap at the dark? The supposition is absurd. Observation mocks the thought. But how I'd enjoy to dream it.

I'd dream a day both warm and humid, though not alarming. Leaves would be brisk about and the puff clouds quick. This, to disarm her. She'd be clipping the hedge; firmly bent, sturdily moving, executing stems; and then the pressure of her blood would mount, mount slowly as each twig fell; and a cramp would grow as softly as a bud in the blood of her back, in the bend of her legs, the crook-snap of her arms, tightening and winding about her back and legs and arms like a wet towel that knots when wrung.

Now the blood lies slack in her but the pressure mounts, mounts slowly. The shears snip and smack. She straightens like a wire. She strides on the house, tossing her lank hair high from her face. She will fetch a rake; perhaps a glass of water. Strange. She feels a dryness. She sniffs the air and eyes a sailing cloud. In the first shadow of the door she's stunned and staggered. There's a blaze like the blaze of God in her eyes, and the world is round. Scald air catches in her throat and her belly convulses to throw it out. There's a bend to her knees. The sky is black and comets burst ahead of her. Her hands thrust ahead, hard in the sill of the door. Cramp grasp her. Shrivel like a rubber motor in a balsa toy her veins. Does her husband waddle toward her, awag from stern to stem with consternation? Oh if the force of ancient malediction could be mine, I'd strike him too!

. . . the vainest dream, for Mrs. Mean is hearty, and Mr. Mean is unpuncturable jelly.

Mr. Wallace can bellow and Mrs. Wallace can screech, but Mrs. Mean can be an alarm of fire and war, falling on every ear like an aching wind.

Among the many periodicals to which I subscribe is the very amusing *Digest of the Soviet Press* and I remember an article there

which described the unhappiness of one neighborhood in a provincial Russian city over the frightfully lewd, blasphemous, and scatological shouts a young woman named Tanya was fond of emitting. She would lean from the second story window of her apartment, the report said, and curse the countryside. Nothing moved her. No one approached without blushing to the ears. Her neighbors threatened her with the city officials. The city officials came—were roundly damned. They accused her of drunkenness, flushed, and threatened her with the party officials. The party officials came—were thoroughly execrated. They said she was a dirty woman, a disgrace to Russia—an abomination in the sight of the Lord, they would have said, I'm sure, if the name of the Lord had been available to them. Unfortunately it was only available to Tanya, who made use of it. The party officials told the city officials and the city officials put Tanya in jail. Useless. She cursed between bars and disturbed the sleep of prisoners. Nor was it well for prisoners to hear, continually, such things. They transferred her to another district. She cursed from a different window. They put her in the street, but this was recognized at once as a terrible error and her room was restored. The report breathed outrage and bafflement. What to do with this monster? In their confusion they failed to isolate her. They couldn't think to shoot her. They might have torn out her tongue. Abstractly, I'd favor that. All the vast resources of civilization lay unused, I gathered, while Tanya leaned obscenely from her sill, verbally shitting on the world.

Mrs. Mean, too, dumbfounds her opposition. There have been complaints, I understand. Mrs. Mean, herself, has been addressed. The authorities, more than once, have been notified. Nothing has come of it. Well, this is wisdom. Far better to do nothing than act ineptly. Mrs. Mean could out-Christ Pius.

Thus the trumpet sounds. The children scatter. They run to the neighbors, pursued by her stick and her tongue, so she can mow and tamp and water her crop of grass that it may achieve the quiet dignity of lawn. At the distance of oceans and continents, I admire Tanya. I picture her moving lips. I roll the words on my own tongue—the lovely words, so suitable for addressing the world—but they roll silently there, as chaste as any conjunction; whereas Mrs. Mean's voice utters them with all the sharp, yet exaggerated enunciation of an old Shakespearean. They are volumed by rage and come sudden and strident as panic. Mrs. Mean, moreover, is almost next door and not oceans and continents and languages away.

"Ames. You little snot. Nancy. Witch. Here now. Look where you are now. Look now, will you? God Almighty. Move. Get. Oh Jesus why do I trouble myself. It'll die now, little you care. Squashed. That grass ain't ants. Toll, I warn you. God, God, how did you do that? Why, why, tell me that? Toll, what's that now? Toll, I warn you now. Pike. Shit. Get. What am I going to do with you? Step on you like that? Squash. Like that? Why try to make it nice? Why? Ames. Damn. Oh damn. You little snot. Wait'll I get hold of you. Tim. You are so little, Tim. You are so snotty, so dirty snotty, so nasty dirty snotty. Where did you get that? What is that? What's it now? Drop that. Don't bring it here. Put it back. Nancy. Witch. Oh Jesus, Jesus, sweet, sweet Jesus. Get. Did you piss in the flowers? Timmy? Timmy, Timmy, Timmy, did you? By God, I'll beat your bottom flat. Come here. You're so sweet, so sweet, so nice, so dear. Yes. Come here. All of you. Nancy. Toll. Ames. Tim. Get in here. Now, now I say. Now. Get. I'll whale you all."

It is, however, an old play and Mrs. Mean is an old, old player. The recitation, loud as it is, emphatic, fearsome as it is, everyone has heard before. The children almost wholly ignore it. When her voice begins they widen away and start to circle, still at their little vicious games. Mrs. Mean threatens and cajoles but she does not break the rhythm of her weeding. Toll digs with his shovel. "Don't dig, don't dig," Mrs. Mean chants, and Toll digs. "Don't dig, Toll, don't dig," and Toll digs harder. "Didn't you hear me? didn't you? Stop now. Don't dig." Toll comes red with effort. "I'll take that shovel. Don't dig. Toll, you little creeping bastard, did you hear me? I'll take that shovel. Toll!" The earth is pierced and the turf heaved. Mrs. Mean drops her trowel, rushes upon Nancy, who is nearest, and slams her violently to the ground. Nancy begins screaming. Toll runs. Ames and Timmy widen out and watch. Mrs. Mean cries: "Ah, you little stink—eating mud!" Nancy stops crying and sticks out her muddy tongue; and perhaps this time she learns, although she isn't very bright, that Mrs. Mean always moves on her real victim silently and prefers, whenever possible, surprise.

Toll and Ames are hard to catch. They keep an eye out. If Mrs. Mean leans on her rake and yells pleasantries at Mrs. Cramm—unfortunate Mrs. Cramm—Toll and Ames push each other from their wagons; but they keep an eye out. The sudden leap of Mrs. Mean across the tulip bed deceives only tiny Tim, his finger in his nose. Mrs. Cramm pales and shrinks and endures it like a slave.

Once I went to a lavish dinner party given by a most particular and most obstinate lady. The maid forgot to serve the beans and my most particular dear friend, rapt in a recollection of her youth that lasted seven courses, overlooked them. I did not nor did the other guests. We were furtive, catching eyes, but we were careful. Was it asparagus or broccoli or brussel sprouts or beans? Was she covering up the maid's mistake like the coolest actress, as if to make the tipped table and the broken vase a part of every evening's business? She enjoyed the glory of the long hours of her beauty. The final fork of cake was in her mouth when her jaws snapped. I would have given any sum, then, performed any knavery, to know what it was that led her from gay love and light youth to French-cut green beans and the irrevocable breach of order. She had just said: "We were dancing. I was wearing my most daring gown and I was cold." She went on a word or two before turning grim and silent. By what Proustian process was the thing accomplished? I suppose it was something matter-of-fact. She shivered—and there in her mind were the missing beans. She rose at once and served them herself, cold, in silver, before the coffee. The hollandaise had doubtless separated so we were spared that. But only that. We ate those beans without a word, though some of us were, on most occasions, loquacious, outspoken, ragging types. Our hostess neglected her own portion and rushed sternly back to glory. Of her sins that evening I never forgave the last.

Mrs. Mean bounds over the tulip bed, her rake falling from her, her great breasts swinging like bells, her string hair rising and whirling, while Mrs. Cramm pretends that Mrs. Mean is calm against the end of her implement and finishes her quiet sentence in her quiet voice and looks straight ahead where her neighbor was as if she were, as good manners demanded, still respectably there. Mrs. Mean roars oaths and passes the time of day. She fails even a gesture of interruption. So Toll and Ames, the older and the wiser ones, keep a good look out and keep in motion. Mrs. Cramm, however, remains as if staked while Mrs. Mean genially hammers her deeper with rough platitudes and smooth obscenity.

Mrs. Cramm is a frail widow whose shoes are laced. Her misfortune is to live by Mrs. Mean and to be kind. She bestows upon the children, as they flee, the gentlest, tenderest glances. Compassion clothes her, and docility. She flinches for boxed ears. She grimaces at the sight of Mrs. Mean's stick, but unobtrusively, so much against her will to show the slightest sign that Mrs. Mean, who reads in the world only small words

written high, misses it all—the tight hands and nervous mouth and melting eyes. Too stupid to understand, too stupid, therefore, to hate, Mrs. Mean nevertheless plays the tyrant so naturally that her ill will could hardly prove more disagreeable to Mrs. Cramm than her good.

It would almost seem that Mrs. Mean is worse for witnesses. She grows particular. What passed unnoticed before is noted and condemned. The wrestling that was merely damned is suddenly broken by violence. The shrill commands rise to shouts and change to threats. It is as if she wished to impress her company with the depth of her concern, the height of her standards. I knew a girl in college who spent her time, while visiting with you, cleaning herself or the room, if it were hers: lifting lint from her skirt or the hairs of her Persian cat from sofas and chairs; pinching invisible flecks of dirt off the floor, sleeving dust from tables, fingering it from the top edge of mirrors; and it never mattered in the least as far as I could discover whether you came unexpectedly or gave her a week of warning or met her at a play or on the street, she tidied eternally, awkwardly shining the toes of her pumps on her hose, brushing her blouse with the flicking tips of her fingers, sweeping the surrounding air with a wave of her hand.

It's early. I'm waiting for the bus when Mrs. Cramm scuttles anxiously from her house carrying a string bag. I prepare to tip my hat and to be gracious for I've had little commerce with Mrs. Cramm, and what knowledge that frail lady must possess! Mrs. Mean is then in her doorway crying: "Cramm! It's a peach of a day, Mrs. Cramm, isn't it? Come over here!" And Mrs. Cramm, most hesitantly, leaves me. "A peach. Grass is a little thin in back. It's been too hot for green things. God damn you Toll, don't you move. Don't you move a shitting inch! Here. Scrubbed the kitchen floor. You can't be too particular. Kids pick up things. Nancy. Be careful. Cut her finger on dad's razor. Nancy! Bring your finger. Show Mrs. Cramm your sore-sore. There. Like to scare us to death." Mrs. Cramm is murmuring, bending, the wounded finger thrust at her nose. "Bled too," says Mrs. Mean. "Got on her dress damn her. How's your sore-sore now, Nennie? The hell it needs more medicine. Kids, kids. Barely broke the skin. Run and play, go on." Mrs. Mean pushes the child off. I avert my eyes and turn my back. She stares at me—I feel her face—and her voice drops for an instant. When it rises again it is to curse and to command. "Keep your brother off that floor, my God!" The bus comes into view and I lose all talk in its noise. Mrs. Cramm does not board with me. She takes the next bus, I can only presume.

Thus they flee: Ames, Nancy, Toll, and Tim. They pick the flowers next door to me. They tramp the garden down the street. They run through Mr. Wallace's hedge, and while Mr. Wallace bellows like a burnt blind Polyphemus, they laugh like frightened crystal. I've had no trouble myself. Maybe she's warned them. No. She wouldn't. I don't exist. And out of her reach a warning is laughter. They are a curse to Miss Matthew, to Dumb Perkins, Wallace, Turk, yet not to me. So she may cry them out of Christendom if she likes, as she would if she were put in garden charge of all the Christian grass.

Ames, Nancy, Toll, and Tim: they go. Wires are strung on little sticks and strips of cloth are bowed upon the wires. Orders are promulgated. Threats are rung over the neighborhood, and Mrs. Mean takes her turn in the famished grass, spinning like a windturned scarecrow, stubbornly and personally plump with her ambition.

It's no use. Her children pour repeatedly, end on end, across it. They find the natural path. They scuff the grass. They chaff it. They stamp and jump and drive it. They scream it down. The wires sag. The bows drag in the mud. The sticks finally snap or pull out. Nancy wraps her foot in a loop of wire and is hauled up briskly like a hare, howling; and Mr. Mean appears, sullenly rolls the wire around the sticks, over the bows, signaling his wife's surrender. The children stand in a line while Mrs. Mean watches from between her kitchen curtains.

The surrender is far from unconditional. Mrs. Mean vents her hate upon the dandelions. She scours them out of the earth. She packs their bodies in a basket and they are dried and burned. She patrols with an anxious eye the bordering territory where the prevailing winds blow the soft heads from the plants of her negligent neighbor—not, of course, Mrs. Cramm, who has a hired boy, but the two young worshippers of flesh who live on her right and who never appear except to hang out towels or to speed in and out of the late afternoon in their car. Their hands are for each other. They allow the weeds all liberty. There the dandelions gloriously flourish. From their first growth across her line, she regards them with enmity. Their blooming fills her with fury and the instant the young couple drive off in their convertible, Mrs. Mean is among the bright flowers, snapping their heads until her fingers are yellow; flinging the remains, like an insult, to the ground where no one but the impervious pair could fail to feel the shame of their beheaded and shattered condition. With a grand and open gesture, unmistakable from where my wife and I boldly

sit and enjoy it, and meant for the world, Mrs. Mean lifts her soiled hands above her head and shakes them rapidly.

There are too many dandelions of course. The young couple does not go out often; and while Mrs. Mean dares, during the time of the dandelions' cottoning, to pace the property line, glaring, her arms in scorn upon her hips, her face livid with furiously staged resignation, watching helplessly the light bolls rise and float above her peonies, hover near her roses, fall like kisses upon her grass, indecently rub seed against her earth; she would not consider—honor would not permit—stepping one foot across the borders if the young couple might observe it, or speaking to them, even most tactfully, about the civic duties of householders; and indeed, she is right this once at any rate; for if those two could not see what we saw so easily, and if they were not shamed or outraged into action by Mrs. Mean's publicly demonstrated anger against them, she might plow and salt the whole of the land their castle grows on and expect no more effect than the present indifferent silence and neglect.

So there are too many dandelions and they go speedily to seed. The seeds rise like a storm and cross in clouds against her empty threats and puny beatings of the air. Mrs. Mean, then, as with all else, sets her children to it. They chase the white chaff. It dances from their rush. Mrs. Mean screams incoherent instructions. The children run faster. They leap higher. They whirl more rapidly. They beat back the invasion. But inevitably the seeds bob beyond them and float on. Mrs. Mean is herself adept. She snatches the cotton as it passes. She crushes it; drops it in a paper bag. Her eye never misses a swatch of the white web against the grass, and after every considerable wind, she carefully rakes the ground. The children, however, soon make a game of it. They gambol brightly and my heart goes out to them, dancing there, as it goes out seldom: gay as they are within the ridiculous, happy inside the insane.

The children hesitate to destroy their favorites. Instead they begin to cheer them on, calculating distance and drift, imagining balloons on tortured courses. Who would want to bring such ships prematurely down or interfere with their naturally appointed, wind-given paths?

Mrs. Mean.

She waits, motionless. The clusters come, one drifting near. Her arm flies out. Her fingers snap. The boll disappears in the beak of her hand. The prize is stuffed in her sack. Mrs. Mean is motionless again though the sack shakes. I am reminded of lizards on rocks,

my wife of meat-eating plants. Mrs. Mean's patience here is inexhaustible, her skill astonishing, her devotion absolute. The children are gone. Their shouts make no impression on her. Mrs. Mean is caught up. She waits. She fills her sack. But at last the furious fingers close on air, the arm jerks back an empty hand, and Mrs. Mean lowers her head to her failure. Alive, she whirls. Her wide skirt lifts. It is a crude ballet, a savage pantomime; for Mrs. Mean, unlike the other mothers of my street, does not shout her most desperate and determined wishes at her children. She forewarns with a trumpet but if her warnings are not heeded, she is silent as a snake. Her head jerks, and I know, reading the signs, that Mrs. Mean is seeking a weapon. The children are now the errant chaff, the undisciplined bolls, and although they are quite small children, Mrs. Mean always augments her power with a stick or strap and dedicates to their capture and chastisement the same energy and stubborn singleness of purpose she has given to the destruction of weeds.

No jungle hunt's been quieter. She discovers a fallen branch, the leaves still green. She shakes it. The twigs whip and the leaves rustle. She catches sight of her oldest boy beside the barn, rigid with the wildest suspense. His boll is floundering in a current of air. It hurtles toward a hole in the barn where cats crawl. His mother hobbles on him, her branch high, stiff, noiseless, as if it were now part of the punishment that he be taken unaware, his joy snuffed with fright as much as by the indignity of being beaten about the ears with leaves.

I think she does not call them to their idiotic tasks because they might obey. Her anger is too great to stand obedience. The offense must be fed, fattened to fit the feeling, otherwise it might snap at nothing and be foolish. So it must seem that all her children have slunk quietly and cunningly away. It must seem that they have mocked her and have mocked her hate. They must, therefore, be quietly and cunningly pursued, beaten to their home, driven like the dogs: bunched on all fours, covering their behinds, protecting the backs of their bare legs from the sting of the switch and their ears with their hands; contorted like cripples, rolling and scrabbling away from the smart of the strap in jerks, wild with their arms as though shooing flies; all the while silent, engrossed, as dumb as the dumbest beasts; as if they knew no outcry could help them; refusing, like the captive, to give satisfaction to his enemy—though the youngest child is only two—and this silence as they flee from her is more terrible to me than had they screamed to curdle blood and chill the bone.

3

Mrs. Mean seizes Ames' arm, twists it behind him, rains blows upon his head and neck. He pulls away and runs. It's to her purpose. She permits his flight. Now the words come and I understand that the silence has been a dam. Her arm points accusingly at his eyeless back. She curses him. She pronounces judgment upon him. She cannot understand his laziness, his uselessness, his disobedience, his stupidity, his slovenliness, his dirtiness, his ugliness; and Mrs. Mean launches into her list, not only of those faults she finds in his present conduct, but all she can remember having found since he first dangled from the doctor's fist and was too slow to cry or cried too faintly or was too red or too wizened or too small or was born with eczema on his chest—a terrible mortification to his mother. He has been nothing but a shame since, a shame in all his days and all his doings. The ultimate word is hurled after him as he slams the door: shame! He is given to understand by shouts directed toward the upstairs windows that there will be more to come, that she is not done with him, the shameful, disrespectful boy, the shameful, discourteous child; and now and then, though not this time, if the boy's spirits are unusually high, if he is filled more than ordinarily with rebellion, he will thrust his head from the window of what I take to be his room, for that is where he has been sent, and make a horrible face at his mother, and a horrible bracking noise; whereupon Mrs. Mean will stop as though struck, suck in her breath, pause dreadfully to scream "what!" at the affront; and then explode derisively, contemptuously, "you! you! you!" until she sputters out. She rounds up the other children if they remain to be rounded up and some minutes later howls of pain and grief can be heard over the whole block.

It is on these occasions, I think, that the children are really hurt. The cuffs, the slaps, the switches they receive are painful, doubtless, but they are brief. They are also, in a sense, routine. The blows remind me of the repertoire of the schoolyard bully: the pinch, the shove, the hair pull, the sudden blow on the muscle of the arm, the swift kick to the shin, elbow in the groin. Evil that is everyday is lost in life, goes shrewdly into it; becomes a part of habitual blood. First it is a convenient receptacle for blame. It holds all hate. We fasten to it—the permanent and always good excuse. If it were not for it, ah then, we say, we would improve, we would succeed, we would go on. And then one day it is necessary, as if there's been a pain to breathing for

so long that when the pain at last subsides, out of fright, we suffocate. So they grow up in it. At any rate, they get larger. They know the rules by heart for it's like a game, a game there is no fun in playing and no profit. Ames retreats into the house with Mrs. Mean's damnations at his back while the others, warned now, ready, circle widely out in alleys and around garages and old carriage barns, between the nearby houses, as Mrs. Mean cautiously seeks them, carefully guarding her rear, swiveling often, doubling back, peering craftily around corners until she finds one and the distance has been closed, when she makes a sudden, silent rush with her switch extended, beating before her the empty air, whipping the heels of the child as it runs for home. I don't know all the rules or I don't fully understand them but I gather that when Mr. Mean's at work the front door is always locked, for the children never try to sneak in that way; and I guess the house must be home base, must be sanctuary except in the gravest cases. If they are not let out again, they are at least not beaten. They don't have to dance after dandelion seeds in the hot yard.

My wife and I find it strange that they should all run home. It seems perverse, unnaturally sacrificial: the self leading itself, as in a great propelling crowd, blind over cliffs, stupidly to the sea. We'd run away we affirm in our adulthood to one another, knowing, as we make the affirmation, that even old as we are, adult as we claim to be, we would return to the poisonous nest as they return, children still largely on turned out feet, the girl unbreasted, the boys inadequate and bare for manhood. We would chew on our hurt and feel the pain again of our beginnings. We would languish for the glory of complaint in the old ties. The eldest Mean child may someday say, confronted by a meanness that's his own, by his own mean soul, that he was beaten as a boy; and he may take a certain solace from the fact; he may shift at least a portion of his blame to the ages. "This shit's not mine." *"Mann ist was er isst."* "Alas for the present time!"

We wish they *would* run off, certainly, as we wanted to run off, for had we run away, had we had the courage we so easily wish for them and the necessary resource, we feel we'd be as much as moral now, clear of the need to disclaim our dirt, round, holding our tail between our teeth. For that, we must exaggerate the past. We inflate it with our wrongs. Fortunately for us then, unfortunately for us now, it was really not so bad. We were not pursued and beaten. We were not beggared in our own yard. We were not flayed within the hearing of the world. Our surprise is symbolic. It is a gesture of speech. It

expresses a wish of our own; and if we really felt the indignation and disappointment we put into words when we see the Mean children flying to their hive, my wife and I; if we ever borrowed to apply to them any anger from our feelings for Mrs. Mean, it would be an injustice on our part almost as great as in our power as mere observers to do them; although I am not above injustice and must confess, despite my knowledge of the dreadful circumstances of his life, a dislike of Ames, the eldest Mean child, especially upon his bike, as deep as my dislike for his cow-chested, horse-necked, sow-faced mother. "It may have been put in him, but he *is* nasty, unnaturally nasty," I'm afraid I often say. "He can't help it," my wife replies, and I glare at the children too as Mrs. Mean flushes them one by one and they run or toddle to the house because I know my wife is right. I exclaim at their stupidity, their lack of character, their lack of fight—I have my list as Mrs. Mean has hers—for I am, in these remote engagements, as fearsome, as bold and blustering as a shy and timorous man can be.

But after all there must be corners in that little house for each of them, corners that are personal and familiar where the walls come together like the crook of a soft, warm arm and some hour has been passed in quiet love with a private treasure. There must be some sight, some touch, that is a comfort and can draw them to the trap. We haven't been suckled, thank God, by Mrs. Mean, or bathed or clothed or put to bed or nursed when we've been ill. Perhaps her touch is sometimes tender and her tone is sweet. My wife is hopeful.

Really I am not. Their house is chocolate. The paint is peeling badly. It has a tin roof. The front porch is narrow. The house is narrow. The windows are low and small. The gutters need repair. There are rust stains on the side of the house. There are cracks in the foundation. The chimney tilts. I cannot think of it as sanctuary for very long. I try. I see the children orbiting. They vanish within and I try to think they could, like Quasimodo, cry their safety. But is there any reason for us to suppose that life inside is any better than the life outside we see? My wife wishes to believe it—for the children—but I cannot imagine Mrs. Mean's long dugs would not be bitter, and I cannot imagine the deep shadows of that little house full of anything warm except perhaps the rolled, damp fat of Mr. Mean, squatting like a toad in his underwear, his bright, hard eyes pinned like beads to his face, his tongue licking the corners of his mouth, his fingers rubbing softly up and down his other fingers, his legs gliding against themselves, his pale skin bluish in the bad light.

But then my wife is subject to failures of the imagination. I have tried to carry her but her sentiments are too readily aroused. Her eyes stay at the skin. Only her heart, only her tenderest feelings, go in. I, on the other hand, cut surgically by all outward growths, all manifestations, merely, of disease and reach the ill within. I conceive the light, for instance, as always bad, of insufficient strength and a poor color, as having had to travel through too much dust and too much muslin, as having had to dwell too long in the company of dark rugs and mohair chairs and satin shaded lamps. The air, I feel, is bad too. The windows are never open. The back door bangs but the breeze is metaphorical. All things in their little house that hang, hang motionless and straight. Nothing is dirty but nothing feels clean. Their writing paper sticks to the hand. Their toilet sweats. The halls are cool. The walls are damp.

I was playing with toy cars and digging roads around the supports of the family porch when I accidentally placed my hand upon a cold wet pipe which rose out of the ground there and saw near the end of my nose, moist on the ridge of a post, four fat white slugs. I think of that when I think of the Means' house and of pale fat Mr. Mean, and the urge to scream as I did then rises strongly in me. I bumped my head, I remember, scrambling out. I was afraid to tell my father why I'd yelled. He was very angry. Even yet I have a distaste for the odor of earth.

My wife maintains that Mrs. Mean is an immaculate housekeeper and that her home is always cool and dry and airy. She's very likely correct as far as mere appearance goes but my description is emotionally right, metaphysically appropriate. My wife would strike up friendships, too, and so, as she says, find out; but that must be blocked. It would destroy my transcendence. It would entangle me mortally in illusion.

Yes. The inside of the Mean house is clear and horrible in my mind like a nightmare no one willingly would want to enter. It may be five rooms. It can't be more. And into these five rooms, at best, the six Means are squeezed with the machinery to keep them alive, with the geegaws she buys, the bright blue china horses which trot in the windows, and some of the children's toys, for they do not lack for toys, at least the kind you ride. They have a scooter, a small tricycle, a large tricycle, one that has a wagon welded to its rear, and a sidewalk bike with which the eldest Mean child rides down flowers, people, cats and dogs. I must salute their taste this once. They haven't bought their children cycles shaped by great outriding fenders of tin and paint like

rockets, airplanes, horses, swans or submarines. They have an eye for the practical, the durable, in such things. I remember with fondness my own tricycle, capable of tremendous speed or so it seemed then, and because it was not fangled up by paid imaginations, it could be Pegasus, if I liked, and it was.

There is no Pegasus—imaginary—real—in the house of the Means. There is father floating among the couches, white as animals long in caves, quiet as a weed, his round mouth working, his eyes twitching, his fat fingers twisting a button on his sleeve.

Purple bath towels hang in the bathroom. I have seen them on the line. They have some colored sheets—one lavender, one rose, one wine —and some brightly yarned doilies you can buy in the living room of a house, a block away, where articles of religion are sold among candies and cozies and pickles in mason jars. The two ladies who make them are also immensely fat and immensely pious. They furthermore sell signs which gloomily, but with a touch, I fancy, of spiteful triumph, herald the Coming of the Lord and the Eventual Destruction of the World. There is a fine one I have noticed in their dining room window which says in scarlet letters simply, Armageddon, like an historical marker. The expectation is tastefully surrounded by a dark border of crosses and small skulls. Mr. Mean bore one of their placards home and tacked it up on the door of the small barn where he keeps his car. In silver script that glitters from the black card it warns of Eternity Tomorrow, and it must have cost him a dollar and a half. At least I take it as a warning. My wife says it reminds him to drive carefully. You see how easily and dangerously she is deceived. However, perhaps for the Means it is not a warning but a hope, a promise of reward; and it no doubt speaks plainly and poorly for my destination that I regard its message so pessimistically.

The Means are Calvinists, I'm certain. They may be unsure of heaven but hell is real. They must feel its warmth at their feet and the land tremble. Their meanness must proceed from that great sense of guilt which so readily becomes a sense for the sin of others, and poisons everything. There is no pleasure. There is only the biological propriety of the penis. In another, more forthright age, they would have read to their children from *Slovenly Peter,* the picture story book of the righteous, where the reward of moral weakness, of which it was an illustrated catalogue, was a severed limb, the loss of teeth and vision, the promise of a bloody and crippling accident, a painful and malignant disease, or fits of madness—all of these disasters tailored by a wise and

benevolent Providence to fit the crime. I remember very well, too, a poem of our Puritan ancestors, in rather strenuous iambics, about a child called Harry, perverse to the heart, who went fishing against his father's wishes, doubtless on the Lord's day too, and with the devil's pleasure.

> Many a little fish he caught,
> And pleased was he to look,
> To see them writhe in agony,
> And struggle on the hook.
>
> At last when having caught enough,
> And also tired himself,
> He hastened home intending there
> To put them on the shelf.
>
> But as he jumped to reach a dish,
> To put his fishes in,
> A large meat hook, that hung close by
> Did catch him by the chin.
>
> Poor Harry kicked and call'd aloud,
> And screamed and cried and roared,
> While from his wounds the crimson blood
> In dreadful torrents poured.

The pattern of punishment here is based on the principle of a comparable eye for a comparable eye but I feel sure that while the Mean children might dread their moral transmigration into ants (a steamroller mash them flat) or butterflies (their arms fall off), all ants and butterflies would dread as much their total intersection. A butterfly, I think, would prefer to die of burned off wings, with some immediacy, possessing beauty, than to be rubbed, pinched, and buffeted about, losing before the power of flight, the desire, and before the desire, the eloquence of its design.

I should like to see Providence take the side of the dandelion. A tooth for a tooth would suit me fine.

But of course all the Means have suffered metamorphosis. They are fly beleaguered bears in a poor zoo with nothing to claw but each other and a dead trunk and no one to hate but themselves, their flies, and the bare, hot, peanut spotted ground.

4

Mr. Wallace has displayed a certain strength. I had thought him shorn but he has joined the Means. They gather now on cooler evenings on the Means' front porch, the misters and the missuses, heads together. Shouts and wails of laughter, snorts and bellows as from steers rise out of the porch's shadows as out of shadowing trees by a wallow bank. It is a juncture, I must confess, that had not occurred to me although I sometimes fancy I am master of the outside chance. It was a part of *her* that I let slip. Following her gyrations in the grass, her rush and whirl and roaring curse, I forgot her geologic depth, the vein of meanness deep within her earth. Against the mechanical flutter of appearance I failed to put the glacial movement of reality.

I drove them together . . . an unpleasant end for so pleasant a beginning.

Mr. Wallace was before at large, as I have said; gigantic in the landscape, swallowing life. There was, in him, no respect for *my* mysteries, only for his own: signs, omens, portents, signatures and symbolings whose meaning he alone was privy to. Mr. Wallace was the paramour of prophecy, yet it came to me when the boy Toll catted across his path that day that it was a stone symbolic more than real that struck the light from Goliath's eyes. It was for prophecy that Jonah fled the Lord. For Jonah's flight the tempest rose, and for the tempest was Jonah flung between the whale's jaws. To be properly swallowed, then, was the secret; to cause, in going down, the oils to flow that would convulse the membranes of the stomach. What must that whale have felt, his moist cavernous maw reverberating prayers and pledges! Would Mr. Wallace be a dog and eat his vomit? I judged that I should soon be cast on dry land. Thenceforth the mystery would be mine, as it was Jonah's. To be the bait, to carry the harpoon down and in that round and previously unshaken belly stick it, then escape—that would be the trick. And prophecy would do it.

How I was enamoured of the notion! All day I lightly walked. Mr. Wallace obliged me by appearing almost at once to record his aches, to dilate upon the midnight's weather, and to wallow surely, by absolutely predictable thrashes, toward the topic. I was on a vast dry plain. Red rock rose out of its distances. Behind me and before me there were multitudes embannered—murmuring. The sun's light struck from shields and spears. I squinted at the giant. His figure wavered. I sensed the wet and dry together. Perhaps the ancient Greek

philosophers were right about the wedding of these opposites. Dust clouded my shuffling feet. Spume flew to the giant's face. It is amazing how the feelings of the universal fables sometimes focus in a single burning vision. Of course that singleness of sight has always been my special genius.

I waited. The ankles were painful. I said I had a mole that itched. A bad sign, Mr. Wallace said, and I saw the thought of cancer fly in his ear. Moles are special marks, he said. I was aware, I said, of how they were, but the places of my own were fortunate and I divined from them a long life. Moles go deep, I said. They tunnel to the heart. Mr. Wallace grinned and wished me well and with great effort turned away. It was a good start. Wonder and fear began in him and twitched his face. When again he came he thought aloud of moles and I discoursed upon them: causes, underflesh connections, cosmic parallels, relations to divinity. There was a fever in him, dew on his lip, brightness in his eye. Moles. Every day. At last there was no art in how he brought the subject up. I spoke of the mark of Cain. I mentioned the deformities of the devil. I talked of toads and warts. I discussed the placing of blemishes and the ordering of stars. Stigmata. The world of air is like the skin and signs without are only symbols of the world within. I referred to the moles of beauty, to those of avarice, cunning, gluttony and lust, to those which, when touched, made the eyes water, the ears itch, or caused the prick to stand and the shyest maid to flower. My fancy soared. I related moles and maps, moles and mountains, moles and the elements of interior earth. Oh it was wondrous done! How he shook and warmed his lips like an old roué and trembled and put anxiety in every place! I was everywhere specific and detailed. *This* may correspond to *that*. The region of the spine is like unto the polar axis. But I was at all times indeterminate and vague as well. A certain hornshaped mole upon a certain place may signify a certain spiritual malignity. I informed him of everything and yet of nothing. I moved his sight from heaven to hell and drew from him the most naive response of bliss, followed first by a childlike disappointment as our viewpoint fell, then a childlike fright. His cane quivered against the pavement. He was in the grip. To be so near, continually, to dying; to feel within yourself the chemistry of death; to see in the glass, day by day, your skull emerging; to rot while walking and to fear the sun; to pick over the folds of your loosening flesh like infested clothing; to know, not merely by the logician's definition or the statistician's count that men are mortal, but through the limpsting of

your own blood—to know so surely so directly so immediately this, I thought, would be a burden needing, if a man were to bear up under it, a staff of self-deceiving hope as sturdy and leveling as the truth was not: an unquenchable, blasphemous, magical hope that the last gasp when it came would last forever, death's rattle an eternity.

There were moles upon that body I was certain. And he would want to know their meaning. It wouldn't matter if he had, before me, given sense and order to their being, these things despair of guarantee. He would want to know. He would have to know. And he would fear to know. What if I said: This is the mole of death most painful? Yet what if I said: This is the mole of everlasting mortal life? What if a miracle should happen? What if?

I waited. Again and again he came, nibbling. Excitement, worry, anticipation, profoundest thought passed and repassed like winds across him. Finally I broached the deadly topic. Mr. Wallace showed his teeth and his eyes hunted in the trees. His cane chattered. He admitted his wife had a mole or two. Ah, I said, where are they? Mr. Wallace blew his nose and bade farewell. Not yet. The rogue would offer up his wife. He wanted a safe bite, a free taste of the news. Well I should freely give it. I worried only that the shriveled witch had moles upon her privates—this shame silencing speech. Such a sign, if I could pronounce upon it, I would deed the whole of fortune to.

Again and again he came until I grew so sick of the smell of oil and the sound of water that I thrust the question boldly toward him. Each time, in silence, he refused it. Again and again he came. I had no heart any more. I feared his coming. I hesitated to enter my yard. And then he said that there were moles upon her body, on her thigh. The thigh, I exclaimed, the home of beauty. The right side or the left? The left. The left! Momentous conditions are being satisfied. Are they low upon it? high? Near the hip. The hip! Glorious! Were there two? Two. Two! And the color: brown? red? black? Yellow. Yellow! What a marvel! And the hair that grew there? the color of the hair that grew there? Surely there was hair. There must be. My friend, you must look again. Look again. Again. Determine it precisely.

So he sounded with the bait. He was hooked through his throat to the tail.

Even now I dare not let my mind look upon the picture of that pair peering beneath her lifted skirts. How infernally lewd! How majestically revolting! She would ask him if he saw any. He would hesitate, realizing more than she how important it was to say yes, and

yet not clearly, not surely finding grounds for an affirmation. He moistens his finger and applies it to the spot. Perhaps a brighter light. Perhaps if she removed her dress. In worry she watches him. What does it all mean? Can they say for certain that hair grows there; that it does not? She is persuaded to pronounce the negative but he holds her back. There is a doubt. There must be a doubt.

Or he has kept the substance of our conversations from her. He spies out her moles, creeps upon her dressing, at her bath, or he remembers lovelier days when he was whole and she was smooth and clean and there was flesh to glory in. Then those moles were yellow on her hip perhaps like beads inviting kisses. No. I see the moistened finger, the hiked skirt, the inquiring frown. I see it clearly, bright with color, dimensional with shadow. There is somehow a bond between them greater than comfort. She is a nurse. She is a wife. But what else really? Was there a time when that same finger touched her thigh with love? I consider it and shudder. The mind plays strange games. No. No youth for them. They were always old. Does that finger touch her now with any tenderness or is it, as I rather fancy, like the touch of a dry stick?

There was a time when my hand, too, held heat and when its touch left a burn beneath the skin and I sought beauty like the bee his queen; but it was a high flight for an old tyrant, and not worth wings. Doubtless there were sweet and brave and foolish times between them. There may be sweet times now. Such times lie beyond my conjuring. I only know that thorough evil is as bright as perfect good and seems as fair; for animals that live in caves are bleached by darkness and so shine in their surroundings as the good soul does in its, albino as the stars. But beauty or any of its brilliant semblances is foreign to Mr. Wallace and his wife and to the Means. Real wickedness is rare. Certainly it does not rest in the tawdry murder of millions, even Jews. It rests rather on the pale brow of every saviour who to save us all from death first kills. Nevertheless, it is the Jewish fleshsmoke that one smells, the burning cords of bodies, and it is hard to see the soul through that stiff irreverent wood, I suppose, just as it is hard for me to light a bright bulb in the house of the Means, or place between the boards of husband Wallace and his wife a lover's need and pleasure.

Although, as it turned out, I was unable to capture Mr. Wallace, who clung tenaciously to his secrets, my triumph was complete. I broke the weaker vessel. I heard his cane rap on the front door and I rushed from my study to prevent his entrance. However, my wife

forestalled me and Mr. Wallace was already in the living room when I arrived, sinking on the piano bench, his face alarmingly red and his eyes blinking at shadows. He filled the room with his hoarse hospitalities. I was brusque with my wife. I had hoped to hold him to the porch. I had read of saints who kissed the suppurating sores of beggars and I had always doubted the spiritual merit of it, but in front of Mr. Wallace I could only marvel that the act had been performed. At last I turned my wife away and Mr. Wallace pulled at the brim of his straw hat and stuttered at a shout his puzzlement. He shook, poor fellow, with anxiety. I laughed. I made light of everything. Moles are of course, I said, the accidents of birth. There's no more to be seen in their position than in the order of the stars. The ancient Greek philosophers, for the most part, have spoken clearly on the subject. Perhaps Pythagoras was not as plain as one would wish, while Socrates had in him from his birth a warning voice and Plato was given on occasion to behavior which was, well, scarcely consistent with his love of mathematics; yet Aristotle remained firm and did not generally recognize the power of premonition. The Christian Church, to be frank, regards such things as satanic, although there have been happenings which do appear upon their face to be . . . of a nature nearer to . . . what shall I say? . . . the epiphany of an occult world: nail holes on the feet and hands of even little boys, visions of the virgin, voices, seizures, transports, ecstasies, then the miracles worked by sainted bones, the wood of the true cross, cloth of the holy cape, blood, excrement and so on . . . wounds in the side from which cool water flows as pure as the purest spring. Still . . . still . . . the church is stern. The Jews, too, are a hard-headed lot. There is of course the Cabbala, the magical book. Nevertheless Yaweh is forthright. And so we know the leaves of tea arrange themselves for our amusement while the warm insides of fowl permit only the primitive to divine. Was it not before Philippi that the ghost of Julius Caesar . . . ? however . . . all omens are imaginings. We should laugh when we read disaster. In medieval days the story went about of a stream of spring fresh water so sweet and pure that on the tongue it made the spirit eloquent and the head giddy with thanksgiving. But when men followed its turnings to its source they found it sprang from the decaying jaws of a dead dog. Thence the faithful spoke of how it was that from a foul, corrupt, and wicked world the clean and whole and good would one day flow. Mr. Wallace thanked me and tried to rise. He beckoned me and I went close and a powerful hand gripped my upper arm and pulled. The

monster rose and his mouth broke open bitterly. Good-by.

At last. But Mr. Wallace cannot whisper. The walls rang with him. What did she think when she heard? Will she cringe again? She came with tea some minutes later and pretended surprise at finding him gone. I had to stare at her until her cup shook. Then I went upstairs to my room.

When all was well begun and seemed well ended, the Wallaces joined the Means. Perhaps the Means read moles better than I do. Better: perhaps they do not know what moles may mean.

The houses here are served by alleys. Garages face them. Trash spills over the cinders and oil flavors the earth. The Wallaces have helped themselves up the Means' porch steps and day is fading when I begin my walk through the alleys by the backsides of the houses. The house of love is first. The shades are drawn. Who knows when passion may choose to crawl from its clothes? I hear the Wallaces moving on the porch—the scrape of a chair. Eternity Tomorrow. It is tacked on the inside of the door. The letters swallow at the light. Their car is parked elsewhere but I resist the temptation to go in. Cracks in the walls net the floor. Beer cans glow. A wagon hangs precariously by its handle to the wall. I am at the entrance and frightened by it as a child is frightened by the cold air that drifts from a cave to damp the excitement of its discovery. Not since I was very young have I felt the foreignness of places used by others. I had forgotten that sensation and its power—electric to the nerve ends. The oiled ash, the cool air, the violet light, the wracked and splintered wood, the letters of the prophecy—they all urge me strangely. Mrs. Wallace hoots. I move on. The lane looks empty of all life like a road in a painting of a dream. I am a necromancer carrying a lantern. It is lit but it gives no light. My steps are unnaturally loud and I tell myself I have fallen into the circle of my own spell. Tin briefly fires. Then I hear the voice of Mrs. Cramm. Her virtuous shoes show beneath the partly opened door of her garage. She stores things there for she has no car. By her shoes are another pair—a child's. The child giggles and is shushed. I have been loud in the lane yet they have not heard me. Now stock-still, I fear to move. The door swings and I back in panic. I jump into the Means' garage. The door does not close and Mrs. Cramm remains hidden behind it with the child, conversing in low tones. Finally the feet begin to move and I duck deeply into the Means' dark. I feel a fool. Steps are coming quickly. Light steps. What a fool. They turn in. The child is in the door, a boy I think—Tim or Ames. I crouch in

the dark by a tire, hiding my eyes as if he might see me with them. Fool. Why? Why have I done this? Why am I hiding here like a thief? The child's feet pass me and I hear a loud clink. Then he comes from the rear of the barn and goes out and his feet disappear onto grass. My courage returns and I follow what my ears have remembered back into the barn but I fail to find what it was he had deposited there. I bark my shin on a cycle. In the lane I put my hands in my pockets. The alley is empty. The light is nearly gone. I realize that I have breached the fortress yet in doing so I lost all feeling for the Means and sensed only myself, fearful, hiding from a child. A cat fires from a crack in Mrs. Cramm's garage and passes silently into the darkness. My stomach burns. I walk forward until I reach the turf and stand by redbud and by dogwood trees. I see her then, utterly gray and unshaped and unaccompanied, a thin gray mist by a tree trunk, and I stand dumbly too while the dusk deepens. Indeed I am not myself. This is not the world. I have gone too far. It is the way fairy tales begin—with a sudden slip over the rim of reality. The streetlights flare on Mrs. Cramm. Her arms are clenched around her. She is watching the Means' front porch from which I hear a whinny. Unaccountably I think of Hansel and Gretel. They were real and they went for a walk in a real forest but they walked too far in the forest and suddenly the forest was a forest of story with the loveliest little cottage of gingerbread in it. There is a flash in the ribboned darkness. From the corner of my eye I think I see the back door of the Means' house close. Mrs. Cramm is fixed—gray and grotesque as primitive stone. I back away. The ribbons of light entangle me. I crawl between garages. My feet slip on cans. I try to think what I'm doing. One day Jack went to town to buy a cow. Cows are real and beans are real. One day Jack went to town to buy a cow and came home with a handful of beans. I slip. There is a roar of ocean like a roaring mob. Have I gone down before the giant? Mrs. Cramm is suddenly gone and I sink home.

It was an experience from which I have not yet recovered. I go back each evening just when dusk is falling and stand by the redbud tree at the back of Mrs. Cramm's yard. I never see her, yet I know that on the evenings when the Wallaces visit with the Means, she talks to the children. I have lain like fog between the garages and only heard whispers—vague, tantalizing murmurs. Every evening I hope the streetlights will surprise her again. I know where every streak will be. I think I have seen her in the back seat of the Means' car when it is

parked in the barn sometimes—a blank patch of stone gray. Is it Ames who slips out to meet her? Recently, while I've been loitering at the end of the alley, taking my last loqk around, I've felt I've mixed up all my starts and endings, that the future is over and the past has just begun. I await each evening with growing excitement. My stomach turns and turns. I am terribly and recklessly impelled to force an entrance to their lives, the lives of all of them; even, although this is absurd, to go into the fabric of their days, to mote their air with my eyes and move with their pulse and share their feeling; to be the clothes that lie against their skins, to shift with them, absorb their smells. Oh I know the thought is awful, yet I do not care. To have her anger bite and burn inside me, to have his brute lust rise in me at the sight of her sagging, tumbling breasts, to meet her flesh and his in mine or have the sores of Mr. Wallace break my skin or the raw hoot of his wife crawl out my throat . . . I do not care . . . I do not care. The desire is as strong as any I have ever had: to see, to feel, to know, and to possess! Shut in my room as I so often am now with my wife's eyes fastened to the other side of the door like blemishes in the wood, I try to analyze my feelings. I lay them out one by one like fortune's cards or clothes for journeying and when I see them clearly then I know the time is only days before I shall squeeze through the back screen of the Means' house and be inside.

LEONARD CASPER:

Passports Never Smile

The hope that is geography doth lie
within duration and endurance; fear

is here of being devoured by a rattling
rain of holocausts and green locusts.

Flight is the longest distance between. Passport
photos know these facts and never smile.

But in the middle of the Mediterranean
we could build our swimming pool.

The season comes, our greedy necks grow stiff,
and no new passenger pigeon shows.

In the Chaco we might take our swatters out
among mahogany, and pester flies.

Off Nova Zembla we were netting flashers
in our purse boats, when we met a sunken city.

Or swelter in Odessa where the sea
looks like a lake of buttered caramel corn.

The Buddha of Rangoon, in his great cold pagoda,
will not drink; and we must eat our curry

(The hope that is geography doth lie.)
coated with the slender flakes of whitewash.

JOHN B. FRIEDMAN:

Carousel

I rode a lion, frozen in his leap
For ostrich, by a gimbaled
Column through his chest. Jockeys yoked
Uneasily to narwhals, sheep
& other beasts, we strove for gold; lured by cymbals
To the race. I stroked
My lion on, changing levels with a mouse.
Geared to sighs of monstrous lungs
Beneath the floor, we snatched:
The rings were out of reach. The house
Blew whistles, flung
Us off the course. I watched
The next contestant climb
My lion; heard the gate-bell chime.

The Public-Fire

In states approximating dreams, my eye
Develops magic powers. I hear the click
Of crab & roar of lion in the sky:
All my father's warnings rustle in the room.

Across the city burns the public-fire
With complement of crows. The stack,
A Cyclops in the Brooklyn night, a pyre
Of tins & scissor threats to little boys.

On evenings of disastrous games, I fit
More easily within my slats, foetal;
Waiting for the stoker to acquit
Me of my pop-gun crimes. I wake
Unsinged. The ash in air is not my own;
All I see in Brooklyn is an obelisk of stone.

A Change on Caesar's Dream

In my hollow globe, I crouch,
A fish in early water.
No weathers touch the surface of my sea.
I, fruit of many forms:
The nut, the worm, the fish,
Strung along the common vine,
Put on these different coats within a year.
O what a wealth of long-bones
Growing; marrow gurgles in my rib.
I wait, a lively engine but for breath.

FREDERIC WILL:

Hard To Fill

The corners are hard to fill
Our moods lament a decrepit lamp
In the dust by the sofa
An aging hibiscus here by the closet
And even the casual spiders that wove
In the nook by the ice-box

Our moods are harder to fill
For any guest they are swept and straightened
Creases are flattened and nooks declared
The view of Kentucky is hung near the sofa
And Blake in the attic

The world is hardest to fill
That drapes its veil on a moody eye
Or baits with the opposite side of the moon
Or turns to a plane in deliberate eyes
Till just when Columbus sails out of sight
The doorbell rings or the cat is sick

JANET FISCALINI:

In the Provinces

In the provinces, where one had been so sure,
Even in sleep, of finding four seasons
And the same birds, the wind displayed obscure
New surfaces, familiar animals
Turned awkward, untrustworthy, and rash.

And though the spiders' dry agility
Looked harmless still, you wheeled about to speak
Whenever country dust, exclamatory,
Rose up along the road. Then, before
You advanced an inch, the light had shifted paths,

The distances had all extended, headlong.
It was a slyness without purpose moved
The transformations, and lay concealed among
The crazed frontiers, observing. So that later,
One afternoon you stood by the beach, alone,

And noiselessly the sea kept crowding, green,
Scented with new pine needles. Nothing rang
Or sounded, but from such unstable sheen
You struggled backward, ridiculous, uncertain
Of a gull's initial or a white-shaved stone.

WILLIAM H. GASS:

The Triumph of Israbestis Tott

Now folks today we're going to auction off Missus Pimber's things. I think you all knew Missus Pimber and you know she had some pretty nice things. This is going to be a real fine sale and we have a real fine day for it. It may get hot, though, later on, so we want to keep things moving right along. And now I'm going to begin the sale with the things back here by the barn. You've all had a chance to look at everything so let's bid right out for these fine things and keep things moving right along. The sale is cash as usual and Missus Grady is inside to take care of that. The ladies of the Methodist Church are kindly providing the lunch. You can see their tables across there in Missus Root's lot and I know you'll want to help all these ladies just as they are helping you. It'll be good I know. All right I'm going to begin the sale back here so if you folks will follow me we'll get started.

It was his first excursion. He had tottered about in the yard for several weeks despite the high grass, and for three months he had practiced in his bedroom and in the living room and halls, but he was going to try himself in earnest now. He'd said he'd see the summer under and he had. The grass was burnt. There were flecks of yellow in the cotton trees. The weeds were wilted and long in seed. Where were all his friends?

Once he had gone out in the morning down the street and everyone was up and he knew everyone. He could hear the anvil ring and Mat's mild voice between the ringings singing to the horses. You could shout from one end of the town to the other and be heard. And in the morning Mat was like a bell.

Israbestis rubbed his cheek. Who was the man with the gold teeth?

He was out of touch. He used to stop at Mossteller's place. Mossteller was a quiet fellow but he loved to joke. He used to stop at Lloyd Cate's on the way. Lloyd would put his foot up on the stove and say he'd overet himself and swear that it was cold if it was May. He and Lloyd would talk until the train whistled for Gilean. When the whistle blew a second time, Lloyd would take his foot down and they would both go and stand in front of the store and stretch. Well, Lloyd would

say, I've got to get at it. Israbestis would shake his head sympathetically and walk off to the station.

People passed impatiently around him. They walked so fast. A crowd was gathering by the barn. Its paint was scaling badly. The roof sagged to a thorn tree. Israbestis mourned. I caught a kite in there he said to some persons as they passed him. The main door hung on one hinge. Windows were jagged. The house, however, was square and firm, beautiful everywhere, without a crack, each brick made by hand and laid by a master. The sound of the crowd grew as he came slowly. All along the front were tall narrow windows Lucy Pimber showed candles in while it snowed on the carolers.

Sam raised his hand and peered between his missing fingers. Everybody laughed. People inched among the chairs and couches on the lawn or sat in rocking chairs and talked or leaned against divans and talked, shading their eyes with their hands. They handled vases, fingered silver spoons, smoothed hand quilted quilts. On the shaded porch the women squeezed themselves between card tables set with tilting towers of china cups, bubbled colored glass and painted plates. In the back, by the barn, the men gathered in serious pairs to smoke, heft heavy implements, and think. Under the lamps at a side of the house, young children sat and fussed with the laces of their shoes. Sam Peach yelled, looked at his fingers gone, and spat. Everybody laughed and he held up between his missing fingers a ball of twine and with his full-fingered hand a fine old saw, a rope, a rubber mat, a can of lime; while in high-backed and formal chairs, beneath the scattered shade of half dead elms, old ladies and old canes leaned together and nodded jerkily. Too bad, they said. Too bad. Too bad.

Not much of a woman. Mean, thin, and silent. Samantha's friend. He excused himself when bumped.

I saw this house go up, Israbestis said. First on the street.

That so?

I saw the cellar dug and the first brick laid. I was in this house the very day Bob Stout, who built her, fell from the First Presbyterian steeple.

That so?

He fell on the iron fence that used to go around it. Parson Peach, he'd just come then—no, no, it was longer ago than that, Weaver's day it was—anyway, Weaver had the fence torn down.

That so?

It was funny about the fence because the congregation had just

got the money together and bought it when Stout fell. They were awful proud of it but they tore it down just the same. It was mighty queer about that fence.

Well that was before my time. I haven't been here long.

Yes I guess it was. I guess it was—a good deal.

Lutie Root? It was her lot across the street. Was that the one her old man got in a swap for a flock of geese? Yes. There was a story! No. That wasn't Lutie Root. She had a harder eye, as hard an eye as her old man had, like translucent rock. She went in the winter. He'd forgot. Hard eye and all, paler and paler till it was out. Who were all these people?

Sam Peach held up a set of jelly molds, a length of screen, an antique drinking cup he claimed was pewter but was not, a box of bolts, a rake. Sam wiped his face with a handkerchief he had tied to his neck. He nodded to the faces in the crowd; exclaimed how hot it was; remarked how hard he worked, in what repair a wooden wringer was. His face was flushed from shouting and the waving of his arms and while he talked he switched from cheek to cheek tobacco with his tongue and when he spat he made a wide and running stain upon the ground. Sam smiled his dark brown teeth. He pointed to a flaw. He held his arms out wide. His nose twitched with harmless honesty. He told what he would use a crooked miter for if he had one, and said how much his missing fingers brought the day he'd knocked them down, and how he'd sold the saw, too, for a dollar more. Everybody laughed and bid. Sam tipped his broad-brimmed hat. He winked, and the friendly lines by his eyes were deep. His wife marked down the sale. They both moved on and with them moved the crowd and everybody's laughter.

I don't know that fellow, Israbestis thought.

I saw this house go up, Israbestis said. First on the street.

Oh?

They built things those days. Bob Stout was a builder. Why I was here the day Stout fell on the fence.

Oh?

It was the highest steeple then in five or six counties and he was putting the cross up on it when the rope broke.

Oh?

He fell clean to the ground. The fence didn't hold him. He went right through to the ground.

Oh?

Yes sir right through. And the cross went off the other way. It was spring. The ground was soft and the cross went right in at an angle. It didn't bust or bend. It went right in.

Funny things happened in those days.

The ground was hard. The drive was dusty. Cars had been driven in the drive and dust raised. The dust had settled on the grass by the drive and turned it gray. Children had written their names on the tops of dressers. Wasn't anybody going to shake his hand?

Quite a sale, Israbestis said.

Lot of junk.

Are they selling the house too?

Sold it already I hear.

That so? Who to?

Vanetti I hear.

Italian?

Contractor.

I watched this house get built.

You might have.

Oh I did. Bob Stout built her.

You don't say. Well live a little longer. You might see Vanetti tear it down.

He thought he knew the fellow with the black cheroot. God if he didn't look like Hog Bellman. Israbestis felt his stomach tumble. Gas. Italians. It was such a big house. Somehow he forgot there were Italians. In those days there weren't many. Sometimes they came to repair the railroad. Or were they Mexicans? Sicilians? Did it make a difference? It always seemed so far away for Italians. There were Italians of course. More and more. And now in this house that used to blaze with lights.

You seen Miss Elsie Todd?

Who?

Maybe McCormick or Fayfield? They used to come in a lot.

Hog Bellman. A high white hat on him. My god. Hunting in the marshes in the time of high water. Mat making them be quiet. Not a bird but the rush of water. Hog Bellman. My god. There's the chief. Good.

You get around pretty good, Israbestis said.

I get around fine. I come to all of them. I never miss a one. Rain or shine. I never miss. Don't see anybody much anymore. Don't see you much, Tott, been sick?

Been fine. Just fine.

Wops got this place. Going to tear it down. I had no truck with them. Troublemakers. They come into town nights and make trouble. I got on to them quick enough. When I was chief I kept things peaceful and the jail full. See the papers?

But Bob Stout built this house.

I remember the time they was fixing the bridge down to Windham. A clutch of them was down there—cheap labor and all and I always said they was cheap too, like Mexicans—and there was a clutch of them big ones. They was big and burnt like niggers from working in the sun. Some of them even was niggers I guess. Yes. Soon as the sun came down they was at it. Came in here by the wagon load.

I remember. I was here then.

You was? Of course you was. Well they used to come in piled up like logs on them wagons and when they let the tail gate down it was like letting a load of logs loose.

They would jump out of the wagons as soon as they got to the edge of town. There was one who . . .

All at once they would pour out. Har! They was big ones!

Remember when Bob Stout was building the steeple?

Course I do. I was chief. He fell. I looked into that believe me. Queer. It was queer. If you ask me . . .

Fell right on the fence, Bob did.

Fell clear of the fence. Landed flat on that there big rock in front.

Fell right on the fence. Spitted him. That rock is in front of the Episcopals. Been there a hundred years.

No it ain't. There weren't no Episcopals then. Remember? That rock at the Presbyterians was hauled out by Careful Lacy. I ought to know. I carried the body. Say, I still got my badge. Want to see it?

I was at the hunt for Hog Bellman.

There. See. I keep it polished.

That came before you of course. Shines.

You don't look up to par Tott. Been sick?

Not a day.

Seen Cate?

Ah, no. Is he still . . .

Saw him at the farm. Too bad. Too bad. He's real bad. Pretty old you know. Pretty old. Shakes bad. Shook the whole time I was there. Terrible. Won't last long. I had a bitch did that after she whelped. Damndest thing. Shook all over the whole time. Her jaw

kept dropping open and clacking. Lloyd don't like it there. He don't like being cared by the county. I wouldn't either. Bitch went white too. Like she'd been scared by lightning. Did I say Cate don't like being cared by the county? Went crazy till I shot her. One day I just made up my mind. I guess we're lucky Tott. My son's a sonofabitch but he's good for money. You don't have any kids? Well you was never married was you? Har. Well you got a pension I hear, and that house. Us men die before our women usually. You don't have to worry about that. There's Samantha though, ain't there? Well you got that pension and that house.

Yes.

Lloyd's got the shakes.

They would sit in the boat and fish in the river. The trees hung over and shaded the sides. They would drift in and out of the shade, eddying with the river, watching the cork float, their broad hats tilted, shading their eyes. It would be pleasantly cool in the shady places where the roots of the willows and the beeches came mossy to the riverside, and the water was black by the boat. They would get caught up in a curl of the river, the water still and black by the boat, until Lloyd would reach up and pull on a limb and the boat would coast out into the sun again where the water sparkled and slapped gently against the hull. It was warm and comfortable and there weren't many fish, but just slow and easy drifting down the checkered river.

Careful Lacy. He'd nearly forgot. Ford and Jasper and Willie Amsterdam. Careful Lacy riding to the fire. Ford and Jasper and Willie Amsterdam. Most people didn't know about that. Careful must have been sixty then. He fought Morgan's men. The fire was a great kite flying to the river. Careful Lacy. He'd nearly forgot. Had an arse like an ape.

Like fishing, said Israbestis Tott.

Some.

Fishing's fun.

I like sledding better.

Sledding's fun too.

You're pretty old. How old are you?

Pretty old.

I bet. What do you do now you're so old?

I was postmaster once.

Not really.

I was. I was postmaster for this whole town. I had the job all by

myself. I did it all.

You ain't postmaster now.

No. I was once. I used to be.

My dad says I'm the busiest he ever saw.

I bet you are. What do you do?

I live in a tree house.

What kind of tree?

A high tree. It goes way up into the air and you can see clean to Columbus.

That's a good way to see.

Oh it's awful high. A thousand feet maybe.

That is high. You'd best be careful not to fall.

You got to shinny most of the way.

I saw this house get built.

You're pretty old I guess. This is an awful old house my dad says. It looks old. It must be awful old.

She's a fair age, yes. I saw her get put up. Bob Stout built her. Laid the brick himself.

Who's he?

Bob Stout was the best builder around. He could build most anything. He took pains. Yes. Most anything.

So can I. I can build anything at all.

I bet. Well Stout was a great climber too. But one day he had bad luck and fell.

I never fall. I'm a better climber than him.

I guess. Bob was putting the cross on the First Presbyterian steeple when he fell.

On our First Presbyterian steeple?

The very same.

The one downtown on the square?

That's the one.

Say!

Oh it's quite a story.

What?

Well let's sit down, said Israbestis Tott, and he eased himself to the cellar door and rested his arms on his knees. The boy sat beside him. This was quite a while ago, Israbestis began, when the churches weren't all as big as they are now, though the First Presbyterian steeple still stretches a good way. Look there. See? When Bob Stout built that steeple it was the highest in six or seven counties, and you could see

it shining like a silver spike when the sun hit it, like it's shining now, for miles. People were proud of it, even if they weren't Presbyterians, because it was the highest one around and the best built. About the same time he was building it, the congregation thought it would be fine to have a fence.

Why?

Well in those days fences seemed important. There was something satisfying about a fence, and they wanted a fence to go around the church—a high one made of iron.

Why'd they want a fence anyway?

It was the kind of fence that a good stick would make a good loud noise on if you was to run it along.

Oh.

That was the kind of fence they wanted—a high iron one with tall sharp pickets close together that would ring loud and handsome with a stick. But not everyone wanted a fence just like that.

Why not?

Well some thought it would be nice to have a fence with deers in it or trees like the one that used to be around Whittacker's, the undertaker's.

I don't think much of that.

I never did either. Finally, after a lot of talking back and forth at meetings while Stout got the steeple higher and higher and everyday crowds came to watch him, even from Peltown and Mindoo and Stone, that could have admired the fence too as long as they were there and full of extra admiration, the members of the church got awful excited about when they were going to move in and it was Easter coming so they decided to get a high iron one with pickets close together like I said. They hurried to make up their minds because they wanted the fence all up and around by the time the steeple was done and then they could celebrate the resurrection proper.

I'm glad they got the right fence.

So was I. I was terrible against the other kind.

So am I.

The steeple got done and the fence got put up around the yard about the same time, only the cross hadn't come. It was pushing Good Friday too. They were able to get the fence from some iron works in Cleveland but the cross was supposed to be all gilded with gold and they had to send to Chicago for that. The cross got ordered late. There was some talk against a gold cross.

Why?

Some people felt a gold cross wasn't Christian.

Why not?

Some people thought the Bible had it in for gold.

Some people don't like anything good.

That's what I thought. Anyway, they decided finally that a gold cross it was going to be, but like I said, they'd stewed around about it for so long it got ordered late and took forever coming from Chicago. Lot of funny things happened about that cross.

What?

I was at the depot when it came all crated up in a great pine box and as heavy as sin. They had the devil's own time getting it off the train and in the wagon. I don't know why because they'd handled things heavier, but it slipped and smashed Kick Skelton's foot flat so's he lost three toes and limped ever after that. He limped, that is, until his whole leg got run over by a lumber wagon and he lost it. He couldn't limp without his leg of course. Kick had a bad time, like his cat. He just kind of went to pieces. He cut off his left thumb with a saw and lost most of his right ear in a fight with some Italians and then he got his foot smashed and then his leg took off like I told you. That wasn't all either.

It wasn't!

Oh Kick had a bad time. He went piece by piece but Bob Stout went all at once.

What happened to Kick? What happened to Bob Stout? Did they get the cross up? What happened to the iron fence?

There's the cross. See?

Is that it? Really? The same one that smashed Kick Skelton's foot?

Sure is.

What happened to Kick then? What happened to Bob Stout?

I'm coming to that. Never hurry a story. Here, have a piece of grass. There's stories in all the old things in this town: this house, the cross and the steeple, the fence, the Episcopal rock—oh I could tell you plenty. It's not just because they're old either. They throw away old things now. But everything happened in Gilean once so you could see it and I nearly always did. People told more stories then. You couldn't get so much from papers. Papers are death on stories. I knew everybody. I knew them a long time. I knew all about them—their whole history—and when they died, then I knew them better. Yes, it used to be easier to be part of a story. For there to be stories, my boy,

things have to stay put a while. Like this house. Some machine will knock over what a real man built. This house has a life too. Every brick made by hand. Think of it. Why this was Lucy Pimber's house! Bob Stout built her!

What happened to Kick?

Yes . . . yes . . . well, Kick got himself a stick of lumber from the wagon that ran over him and whittled himself a wooden leg. He got so he could get around pretty good, though it hurt some he always said. He used to sit in Lloyd Cate's store and push checkers with the end of it. Kick got bolder and bolder with that leg of his. He got so he was proud of it and what he could do with it that nobody else could do with theirs. He'd stick it sudden in Lloyd Cate's stove or push checkers with the end of it or scratch somebody's back or pound holes in the ice for fishing or nail ants one by one as they crawled out of a log.

Didn't he burn it?

He didn't keep it in long. He just put it there for the surprise it gave people. He always took it out right away. He used to say he was a Hindoo who could walk on hot coals.

Who is a Hindoo?

Somebody who can walk on hot coals in their bare feet.

Golly, is there somebody can do that?

Yes indeed. And more. A Hindoo can climb up a rope and disappear.

So can I. I can do that.

He can climb right up a rope that isn't fastened to anything except the sky and disappear.

I don't believe it. What happened to Kick's leg?

I didn't say anything happened to Kick's leg.

Didn't anything happen to Kick's leg?

As a matter of fact something did.

Good. I knew there would.

It made a man of him, losing that leg did. Kick was mean and surly and behind himself all the time, but with only one leg he was like a pirate, you know, and people pointed at him and kids asked him about it, and he could nail ants like nothing you ever saw.

I bet. Was he really a pirate?

No. But nearly. Nearly he was.

Boy!

I could tell you about the time when Kick and I were on the river

and thieves were on the river too. . . .

Boy oh boy! Do! Now!

But first about Kick's leg. Kick got bolder and bolder on his leg like I said. He tied his fishing line to the tip of it. He wouldn't wear boots. He learned how to hop on the point. Well one fall he decided to go hunting with his dog, which is what he usually had besides his cat for company. We told him he oughtn't to go hunting alone. I told him. Lloyd Cate told him. Mat Watson told him, and Mossteller, and Spink—lots of people. But you couldn't tell Kick anything anymore. He was full of the pride of his leg. He was full of the pride he took in all his accidents: his smashed foot and his cut thumb and his torn ear and his bit nose—I forgot before about his nose, rat bit it—and then his whole crushed leg of course. He used to tell about all of them, sitting in front of Lloyd's, waving his wooden leg and showing the knife that had whittled it. So one day, even though we'd told him, Spink and I had spoken to him only the morning before, he went out alone for rabbits, talking the whole time to his dog like he always did. It was one of those fine smokey fall days I remember, a gentle warm one, further past summer than today.

What happened?

We figured afterwards he tried to climb a fence. He didn't calculate on having to do that I guess. But of course everybody had a fence around their pasture and Kick came on to one after a rabbit. Matter of fact it was Luke Ford's fence. Ah there's a story in that fence, my yes. It belongs with all the stories there is about fences as one of the best ones. Ford and Jasper and Willie Amsterdam. See that fence down the street? That wire one? To keep the kids in. Think there's a story in that fence? There's nothing in that fence. But just suppose there was. Who'd know? Who? And suppose there was somebody knew it, who'd tell it? Who? And even if somebody told it, who'd listen? Who? What is there to fences? Ford's fence for instance. Bob Stout spitted on a high and iron one.

What about Kick?

Yes . . . well he tried to squeeze through the rails, but he couldn't of course, and I guess he didn't want to walk down the fence to find a gate, so he tried to go over. He got his whittled leg across. It was funny.

What was funny?

None of us ever knew what happened exactly, but Lloyd and I reasoned it out this way later. He had to climb the fence and of course

having only one good leg he needed all his arms, so he put his shotgun on the other side of the fence, leaning it up against the rails. He didn't have his gun broke, probably because a broke gun doesn't lean real well. Anyway, when Kick swung his wooden leg over, the point of it went smack in the barrel of his gun.

Not really.

It's a fact! Stuck in the barrel of his gun. I can see Kick straddling the fence, shaking his leg back and forth so the gun would let go, but it must have hung on like a dog will when it's got its teeth in something.

That is funny. What happened?

I can see him shaking his leg real hard to get it to let go and somehow hitting the gun against the fence so it went off.

Honest?

It's a fact. The dog came howling and yipping down the street, running crazy up to people and then bounding off and stopping and looking back and then bounding off, barking and running, and Lloyd and I saw him. We were sitting in front of Lloyd's store like we did usually. We ran off after the dog but he stayed ahead of us the whole way, stopping sometimes only to look back. I half expected to find Kick with his leg caught in some roots or something and I was making up funny things to say. We ran until we were both plumb in and then we saw the fence and found him: one leg on one side and one leg on the other.

Holy mackerel!

I should say so. There was that leg of his still stuck in one barrel and the other barrel still smelling where it'd fired off.

Man alive!

That's the way it was.

Did Kick make another leg?

He couldn't.

Boy! That was a pretty good story.

Thank you son. That's the story I call the story of the man who went to pieces.

Now tell me about Bob Stout.

Oh yes. That's the story I call the story of the high and iron fence. It's quite a story. Well, as I was saying, everybody was anxious about the cross getting in from Chicago. And when it finally came. . . .

Now folks we've got four fine beds here and we're going to sell them all. Kids, don't bounce on the beds. These are fine beds and the

springs and mattresses all come with them. You can feel what shape they're in. It's first rate. Here's your chance to get a real good bed. Say can everybody hear me? There's too much talking, please ladies. All right, fine. We might as well start right here and go right down the line. This here's solid cherry, and isn't she a beauty! There, just feel that mattress. Looks like new. Lot of use in them yet. Of course if you don't want to use the springs and mattress that is on it, you don't have to. You can put anything on it you want to. Look at that wood. Well now what'll you say to start for this cherry bedstead and this fine mattress and good springs. Who'll say twenty-five?

Gaiety was continuous.

Don't talk to dirty old men.

Israbestis moved his feet with effort. He was tired and stiff. He made his way slowly to the back of the house through the crowd flung out like a ragged shirt and cupped some water from an outside tap, rinsing the dust from his mouth. He spat and watched his spit ball up in the dirt under burnt marigolds. At the frayed edge of the crowd the chief was gesturing to a man whom Israbestis didn't know. The chief held out his badge. The man craned to see Sam Peach. The chief touched the man's arm. The man walked away, turning his side, craning to see Sam Peach. The chief's badge shone. Israbestis counted balls of spit. His dark room now seemed cool and joyfully confining. You could imagine maps in the wallpaper. The roses had faded into vague shells of pink. Only a few silver lines along vanished stems and in the veins of leaves, indistinct patches of the palest green, remained—the faint suggestion of mysterious geography. A grease spot was a marsh, a mountain or a treasure. Israbestis went boating down a crack on cool days, under the tree boughs, bending his head. He fished in a chip of plaster. The perch rose to the bait and were golden in the sunwater. Specks stood for cities; pencil marks were bridges; stains and shutter patterns laid out fields of wheat and oats and corn. In the shadow of a corner the crack issued into a great sea. There was a tear in the paper that looked exactly like a railway and another that signified a range of hills. Some tiny drops of ink formed a chain of lakes. A darker decorative strip of Grecian pediments and interlacing ivy at the ceiling's edge kept the tribes of Gog and Magog from invasion. Once he had passed through it to the ceiling but it made him dizzy and afraid. Shadows moved quixotically over the whole wall, usually from left to right in tall thin bands, and sank behind a bureau or below the bed or disappeared suddenly in a corner.

Lying there staring at the wall in the partial darkness hour on hour, the pain rising as periodically as high water and leaving only a slight backwash of relief when it receded, Israbestis lamented bitterly his lack of education. He sent himself on journeys with an effort that brought sweat to his brow and moistened his palms and the back of his ears. He took ship down the faint crack rivers. He cut his way through matted, tortuous jungles designated by the pale leaves. He trudged across vast blanks of desert and drank thirstily at muddy holes. The days that he was in the wall he thought of himself primarily as a sailor. He conjured up bright images of sail, green swells on the reaches of the ocean, the brown slabs of river mouths and the awesome blue chop and the trailing spray of troubled weather. Climbing the shrouds, the springs of the bed squeaking like the rolling deck and hull and like the tackle in the block, he would sight a dark cloud puffing from the horizon. Funneling up, it would run at the ship and Israbestis would hitch himself on his elbow, waving his other arm free of the clothes, and shout, "Look out, she's coming on, look out, look out," for he knew no nautical terms and nothing of seamanly action. Pain would storm at his eyes. Sweat would drip from his nose. "She's a blower, captain, aye, she's a roller, captain," Israbestis would cry. "The worst I've seen in these seas." The hiss of his words was like the spray from the bow. Israbestis screamed in order to be heard above the wind in the rigging howling in the shrouds and through the ports of the ship. Then all of a sudden it would be gone. He would watch the paling cloud and the dimpled water disappear before he fell, for a moment, asleep.

In this way he visited the ports of the world. He was a Chinese, a Hindoo, a sheik; he rode upon wild Asian horses and on the backs of elephants in India, while on camels he crossed the African wastes; but the farther he traveled, the more bizarre and remarkable his adventures, the less satisfying was his life in the wall. More and more his fancy had to supply his vision with its objects, had to make up even the course and color of the sun, the feel of the ground, so different everywhere, and above all, the smells that inhabited the corners of the earth. He was conscious, always, of the inadequacy of his details, the vagueness of his pictures, the falsehood in all his implicit etceteras, because he knew nothing, had studied nothing, had traveled nowhere. Consequently he was never fully in the wall, he was partly clenched in the bed clothes, clawing at the skin of his legs and biting his arms. He was only partly bowed by rain or sand or sleet, crouched before

the attack of lions or wild tribesmen, swimming for his life. The pain struck without obstruction then, and he closed like a spider on it.

On better days he left the wall although he always began in it. Gently closing his lids to allow an eyelash of light, he would push off from the bank and coast by the torn hills, poling the grease spot marsh, and by the time he had baited his hook and dropped his line in the plaster chip he was in the history of his life, out of the wall, in the old slow world. He sat by Lloyd Cate's stove or he leaned back on a bench on Lloyd Cate's porch in finer weather. He took his early morning walk through the town, the anvil singing out, and he went to the depot three times a day for the mail. He would stop at Mossteller's to talk or at the bakery, passing the time in the pleasantest way with news of people, conditions of the land or crops, predictions of the weather. All his friends were clear in his imaginings. He knew them by their dress, by the mannerisms of their walk, by their characteristic tilts and gestures. His dreams were not embarrassed by clichés, but in each he always knew the precise feel of the air, what manner of birds were singing, the position of the sun, the kind of cloud, the form of emotion in himself and others, and every felicity of life. As his friends approached he called out gaily to them. "Hi there Pete. 'Morning Michael, Billy. Well if it ain't Claude Spink, by god, and Nichol Ames." They came to visit in his illness. Hog Bellman. Bullet in his back. Careful Lacy. Pants undone, silly grin on his face. Bob Stout with nails in his mouth. Samantha. Sister. Like a rod in watered silk. Tale after tale he told, each many times over, getting them right or trying to, amazed at what he forgot and what he remembered. There was a secret in every one and he tried to discover it. When the Hen Woods burned, for instance, the way he told it you could taste the ashes in Careful Lacy's mouth. Indecision was put as plain as a cow in a field. Luke Ford. Ben Jasper. Willie Amsterdam. And then May Cobb. Of course he hadn't but he knew what it was like to be the man who'd had her. God. Not pretty. Not round in the rump or full in the bust, either, but god! Every line of her was essential. He put that plain too. He made it seem as if the juices of the body would all squeeze out. He often saw her up to her elbows in cream. Her twisted mouth. May I have more punch she asked politely. Damn loud band.

Careful Lacy was riding the back roads; the fire was a cloud. He knew the secret to that. He walked through the whole of his storied past, greeting everyone: Kick Skelton, Eliza Martin, May Cobb. He kissed the pits of her neck. There was Brackett Omensetter, Lucy

Pimber, Lemon Hank. And all the dogs. And all the cats and cattle. Hog Bellman with a knife. Swine and sheep. Madame DuPont Neff, from Paris, and her udders. Something French. But best of all May Cobb and the blades of her shoulders. His eyes would open sometimes and Israbestis would climb like a well young man from his bed and walk down the hollow halls. He would go all over the house, in a fever, putting his hands to furniture and geegaws until his hands were black. Sometimes he climbed to the attic and felt the relics. Other times he went to the barn in back or to the basement. But always he would weary at last and drop to the floor on his knees, wherever he was, weeping noisily. It was then that he would have his worst attacks.

Now folks we've got this china here. You all know what Missus Pimber did with paints. A lot of you I know been waiting just for this. It's plenty hot so we'll get right along. We got here a decorated—this a toothbrush holder, Grace?—a hand painted toothbrush holder my wife says. It's china, and it's signed by Missus Pimber with her name. See there? Now everybody'll want this and so what'll it be, what? All right a dollar, a dollar I have to start, one dollar, so I have one, one, who'll say two, two, I have two over there, right off, and everybody wants it, now do I hear three, that's three thank you now four and who says four, four, and who says fifty then, fifty, I have three and who says fifty, three twenty-five—look, that's not much to ask for a hand painted toothbrush holder—once more and you're out. Three twenty-five? twenty-five? Three, then, it's three to that lady over there thank you. Now we have here a fine china bowl, also hand painted, and it's a dilly. Hold it up there George so the folks can see it. That's a honey, ain't it, hay? What are them, birds? That's signed by Missus Pimber too, right there. Hold it higher George. Oh say now what'll it be to begin? See them birds? Ain't they pretty? What am I bid? Lots of mashed potatoes go in that, boys. So, so, so now, let's begin, and what'll you give for this hand-painted bowl?

Longlegs, like a small smooth pebble walking, crossed a brick and stopped on a line of mortar. If he walks another row I'll get him, Israbestis thought, but the spider ran up three and sat, waving a thread-thin leg. Israbestis put the shadow of his hand over the spider. It rubbed its feet together. From the withered end of a marigold another spider swayed on a strip of silk. This one was small and black with yellow spots. Ants milled by the wall, chasing one another back and forth. Israbestis wiped his brow and leaned against the house. The sun was orange. He could feel the blood beating in his stomach. Don't talk to dirty old men.

Excuse me but maybe you can tell me how old that cradle is. The one by the churn there, there by the tree.

The young man's shadow darkened Israbestis' spider. It ran swiftly up two courses and halted in the sun. Israbestis followed the young man's finger and shook his head. I'll have to see, he said, though I most likely know it.

I didn't want to bother you. I just thought you might know.

I watched this house go up. First on the street.

Really.

I saw the cellar dug and the first brick laid. As a matter of fact I was in this house the very day Bob Stout, who built her, fell from that steeple over there.

Really.

Quite a builder Bob was. You can see. Look at that brick. All hand made. He fell right on the iron fence that used to go around it. It was Saturday. Between Good Friday and Easter.

The First Presbyterian? My wife and I go there.

Really! Well! That's the one, the church he fell from.

Bending over the cradle was a young woman, plainly pregnant, who pushed at it with a cautious finger, her head moving slightly as it rocked. It's awful cute, she said.

Israbestis felt his stomach tumble. Gas, he decided. He knew the cradle. He even remembered suddenly how Lucy Pimber got it. That was Brackett Omensetter's cradle, Israbestis said.

How old would you say, the young man said.

Pretty old. Pretty old. I don't know how long Omensetter had it before he wagoned over. That was 1890. Omensetter probably made it. He had two daughters when he came. Let's see. The oldest was about nine. Make it 1880 maybe.

Do you remember that, the young man said.

I remember Omensetter coming. Everybody who lived here then remembers that.

What is it, pine?

Yes, it's pine.

It's awful cute.

It won't go for much. Maybe we can get it. Come on honey.

I don't imagine anyone who remembers it will bid, said Israbestis desperately.

Why not? It's sweet.

Well, it's a long story. That's Brackett Omensetter's cradle. That

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doesn't mean anything to you, you don't know about Omensetter's luck, but it means a great deal to all of us still living in Gilean who were there when Omensetter came down the western hill. Nothing's ever happened in this town like it. Nothing ever will. Nobody forgets the hunt for Hog Bellman either.

Come on honey.

It had been a wet spring, Israbestis began, wetter than most you'd want to call wet, and the road from Hawkins to Gilean was all mud and running ruts and deep brown holes. There was hardly a day it didn't rain, but the day Brackett Omensetter drove over was as warm and clear as this. He had everything he owned piled up in the wagon with a cradle tied to the top of it, and nothing covered. That was the kind of man Brackett Omensetter was. He knew it wasn't going to rain again. He counted on his luck.

Sam Peach came suddenly. People were around him. Israbestis was pushed from behind. Sam was talking in a loud voice and pointing to the churn. He moved the handle up and down. Israbestis struggled against the people. There were strange legs against him. He pushed to the edge, his stomach turning. Sam laughed uproariously. The crowd roared. There was laughter everywhere. A tall farmer slapped his knee. Peach was selling the cradle. To perish with the owner, that was wise.

Israbestis rested under an elm that was dying of disease. Was that Mabel Fox? Mabel Fox's head was larger and her ears were a fox's ears. When he was a kid, and Mabel was a little girl, the boys used to say: do you know Mabel Fox? and then laugh raucously. They used to chant: Mabel Fox has ears like a fox; put her head in a box and let's throw rocks. That couldn't be Mabel Fox. Her head was too small. What had become of Mabel, he wondered. Put her head in a box. Dead likely. He stared at the ground until his vision blurred. Do you know Mabel Fox? He saw a blade of broken brown grass as something strange, not grass at all. It was like looking at a word until it lost its meaning. Mabel Fox has ears like a fox. The world seemed to dwindle in his vision of the blade. Then he reached down and snapped it off. Let's throw rocks. He held it for a moment on the tips of his fingers. It lifted; halted in the air; dropped between his feet. He studied its eaten edge, its blunted point. He carefully set his heel on one dead end.

The shoes in front of his were like his own. Black and cracked like his, they laced with hooks and went above the ankles. Soiled white cotton socks oozed out of the shoes and piled up into limp and shiny

gray serge pants. The pants were dotted with grease spots. There was caked dirt in the wrinkles. The fly was mis-buttoned. Suspenders of yellow webbing and brown leather held the pants to a shrunken chest where a frayed, collarless, formal shirt bunched under them and under flowered blue elastic bands. Don't you hear good anymore, the chief shouted. A car backed roughly out of the drive. The chief retreated, fanning the air. Israbestis felt the dust in his nostrils. It lodged between his teeth. It filmed his shoes. Israbestis rubbed the stubble on his chin. He sank to his back with a weary groan.

How big of a cat have you ever saw, the boy asked.

Well now I've seen some pretty big, said Israbestis Tott.

How big?

Oh let's see. There was Mossteller's cat—huge with yellow eyes—he was near twelve when he died and the size of a dog.

How big of a dog? As big as a pony?

Don't be silly. No cat's as big as that. I swear, though, Skelton's cat might of grown up to it, give him time and rats enough, where he hunted by the station. It was alive. At night stars were scattered in between the shed crates, all by twos, a mean red. Why I remember if you rattled a stone in there, there was a scutter sound like leaves leaving a road in a strong wind. Skelton's cat would snarl at you for spoiling his stalk, and you'd see his eyes beam up sudden from on top of a box where he sat, lashing his tail to the beating of his heart.

You can't hear that!

Of course you can't. I didn't say so. But cats have got the hunter's heart. If you know how to, minding it ain't easy, not to be picked up like a marble and took home, you can hear them beat at dusk, just at the time when you can see through their swallow eyes, if you look hard and straight in at them when they grow big for the evening, and see backwards down their tight cat strings to their very hunger.

Honest?

You just listen. It ain't easy. Quieter than their feet is all their inner talking; just the same, their hearts are speaking to the grass and to the falling dew and to the resting stone.

What do they say?

Nothing you can put in words. But you've seen cats and how they get low in the grass and put their eyes on what they're after. Have you seen them with their mouths aquiver and not a sound coming out? They want the whole world to be still while they move.

So the rat won't run?

So the rat won't run. So the bird won't fly. So the longlegged hopper will brush his teeth and the goldfish float close to the claw water.

How old was Skelton's cat when he was near to a dog's weight?

Mossteller's cat?

Skelton's cat.

He was about the age I was then.

How old was that?

Fourteen maybe.

That ain't very old. Mine's twenty-nine.

Really? That old!

Well twenty-nine or thirty-three.

That's as old as I ever heard of.

I knew it.

He lived too long and got too fat.

What happened to him?

There's a story in that.

Tell me, if it's a story. I like cats—soft ones anyway, that don't scratch.

Here was no soft cat, my boy. No sir. Leather fur he had, and as for scratching, why he could leave his mark on brick as easy as a rake makes ruts in the spring dirt.

Boy! Say the story then, if he had leather for his fur. I like that. I like stories about Kick Skelton. Did his cat go hunting with him like his dog did?

Just wait. Like I said, Kick's cat lived by the station. He lived around it in the spring and fall and summer like birds live around their nests. I suppose like rats around trash too, because they did. Maybe Kick's cat didn't live by the station at all. Maybe, because the dump was near, and the rats came to live around it, Kick's cat came to live around the rats, and the station just happened to be there. I was never sure about that. Anyway, he did, though he was no particular place ever, when you looked. But it was all his and he was never far. If something happened strange: if two things different noised together, or if someone laughed a way he hadn't heard before, or squeaked new boots or made a funny motion, like Able Hugo who used to leap straight in the air sometimes, just for the fun of it; whenever anything happened the least from the usual, for he was terrible against that, he'd be to see—and all the trains. When a train was late he'd sit in the bed and stare down the track and lash his tail until the whistle sounded. Still he'd sit there until the train came down on him and at the last

second, as slow and lazy as you please, he'd turn his back and walk away.

Golly.

In the winter he often slept inside the station. He knew to an inch how far from the stove to sleep. He knew where everybody spat and where we stamped the snow from our boots, shaking the floor, and where the wind came pouring, snowflakes with it, rattling the paper spills we kept in the woodbox. He knew where a live ash from a pipe might land or a whittler's shavings, and he'd figured the fall and roll, I'm sure, of every checker to the corner when the board was spilled, as it often was if Jenkins played. Jenkins. Now there was a fellow . . . However . . . Kick's cat knew everything about that station. He knew where most of the light fell, and the talk, and where the smoke went. He knew even, I bet, how many flakes would blow to the stove when Kick came in. He balled up on a piece of canvas under a bench and covered his nose with a paw. He sighed and sucked in his sleep sometimes, and sometimes he snored.

Not really.

It's a fact. If we had time I could show you where he'd scratched some bricks like I said he could.

Honest?

Course.

Did he stay there all the time, in the station I mean?

He didn't sleep there often enough so you could say he lived there, for he was sometimes out in the worst of the weather. It was in the middle of winter I found his tracks in strange places, and in the winter most he kept his habits secret. I'll tell you about that later.

Did Kick's cat have a name?

A name?

Yes, a name. Like Isaac, maybe, or Brineydeep.

Gracious. Brineydeep?

If I had a cat I'd name him Brineydeep or Isabel.

I thought you said you had a cat.

I just said that. If I had a cat he'd be as big as a pony and have a long tail. Did Kick's cat have a long tail? Mine would, and when he did, I'd call him Whiskers instead of Brineydeep probably.

I don't understand that.

What was Kick's cat's name? Molly's turtle's Sam, which is dying.

His name was Kick's cat.

If he didn't have a name you couldn't find him. I know a kid got

his name erased and he went away forever. Nearly forever. Longer than that even. You go bango, you know, bango!

What happened to him?

He went away invisible so no one could see him.

No one at all?

Only trees. Things like that.

Who told you so?

A man. Bango! You go bango!

A monkey.

Maybe a monkey. Say. What was Kick's cat's name?

Kick's cat.

Why?

Because that's whose cat he was.

I bet he knew everything about trains and stations.

He knew everything about trains and stations.

I bet he knew when trains got to Chicago Illinois.

He knew when trains did anything.

I bet he was fierce as everything, like a turkey.

Turkeys aren't very fierce.

I hate turkeys. They gobble at you.

Well Kick's cat was fiercer than that.

I bet. I bet he could fly.

Of course he couldn't.

He could.

No.

At night. At night he could.

Say, who knows about this cat, boy, you or me?

Tell me how he knew about trains and stations.

You going to listen or talk?

I want it to be a long story.

It is a long story.

Put everything in it.

I always put everything in.

Is it good and long? All good stories are long.

Well they ought to be anyway. So . . . Kick's cat knew everything about trains and stations. He could gallop up a rail like it was a walk and skip across the tracks without moving a cinder in the bed. He perched on spouts and dropped sudden on unloaded crates to claw and sniff out the city wood. When a train was in he would march through the cars, his tail fluffed up and curled over his back, rubbing

against the passengers and purring the only time he purred, with a deep bass purr, like a tractor's. The passengers would give him things to eat: peanuts and crackers and candybars and sometimes the centers of sandwiches. Kick's cat hated bread. He would lick it clean if it was minced ham, but afterward he'd hook the slice with a claw and toss it down the car. He ate the inside of a lot of sandwiches, come to think of it.

I hate bread.

You don't hate bread.

I do.

You don't.

Kick's cat hated milk.

He loved milk. He doted on it. He drank three gallons and a pint a day.

He didn't.

Maybe more than that. I couldn't say.

Honest?

That's a way cats have. They've got to love milk and fish and chase mice and rats and birds. Otherwise they ain't cats. It's what they call a law of nature.

My cat hates milk.

You don't have a cat and if you did he wouldn't hate milk, but if he hated milk he'd be a beaver and bite you in half like a log.

Kick's cat then.

Well. He was big and tawny. He had a face as round as a barrel and great wide circle eyes.

Cheese. I got to go. That's my ma. She'll be awful mad if she sees me with you again.

But what about Kick's cat?

I got to go.

But I haven't come to the story. You don't know about the rat. You see there was a particularly big gray rat, as big as a boot maybe, maybe bigger, and that rat wasn't afraid of anything.

I got to go.

But the rat. It was the rat that bit Kick's nose. Remember? It was the challenge to the fight.

Bye.

But what about the great fight—between Kick's cat and the bootbig rat? He was bootbig I tell you. You'll want to hear. Stay and hear about that . . . I didn't finish about Bob Stout either, remember . . Pirates!

The churn was sold. The cradle. He didn't see who got it. All the tools were gone. The canned goods. Sam Peach had cleaned the back and swept one side. Sofas. Chairs. The row of ladies was empty. It was the heat. The sky was a vacant blue. Was that fellow the son of Parson Peach? Could that be? No resemblance. Lamps. Satin shades and tassels. Now plates and coffeemills and cups. The crowd was with him in the front. It seemed smaller. More painted plates by Lucy Pimber. Pepper mills. Goblets of cranberry glass. Cut crystal bowls. Linen. Rugs. Rags that were old clothes. To perish with the owner. That was wise. Samantha. She would sell his bones. What would his bones bring?

Israbestis rose with effort. He wasn't used to standing or to walking. He limped for water. The sun hung red in the west. The tap was warm. He searched for bricks, aware of his sweat. His eyes went over every pit and crater. He saw his spit crusted flat in the dust and spat again on top of it a cottony spit. He pushed aside the stems of marigolds and inspected all their rusty petals. Their scent was strong. He hunted in their leaves. There, beside his foot on the walk, stilting on its thread-thin legs, the pebble stood. Israbestis bent down until his shadow fell over the spider. It suddenly fled. He pursued it down the walk with his thumb, jabbing. It nearly escaped his reach which would have been too bad for they were alone in the world, but he put his thumb down and the longlegs went out like rays around it. Then slowly they curled up. Bango, you go bango, Israbestis said. The cement was hot on his thumb.

What are you doing mister, killing spiders, a little girl said.

Yes. Killing spiders, Israbestis whispered, getting up.

Good. I hate spiders. They crawl you up.

Yes.

They're nasty.

Yes. Nasty, said Israbestis Tott.

JULIA MARIA MORRISON:

Eve As Rider

I had a special cart—
Its color: raging blue—
Which had one wheel too large.

This cart worked with a horse—
His color: scholar's blue—
Who had one leg too small.

When horse limped to the right,
The cart tipped to the left,
But kept the road upright.

So roads were left behind.
Soon flowers were swaying there;
The trees were bright with fruit.

These fruits were on my right
And weeds were on my left,
With cart and horse between.

I reached out for the sky
Which dropped rain in my eye
And washed my fingertips.

My eyes grasped at the sun—
He singed my poor right side
And gave its eye to night.

Water on my left,
Evening on my right—
My hands must wish and guess.

Then my hunger shrieked.
I reached out, took a bite,

And lost—*that* fruit was weed.

I'd made my midnight hour,
Caused the fiery stream,
And slipped. Could blue be power?

G. MORGAN GIBSON:

Voice

Once a man by mooing
could bring the bulls for miles
and miles around to rioting
like men for a mere fiction.

Once a man at midnight
could like the cock of dawning
drive ghosts like geese to torment
back to the burning barnyard.

And men have marched to "Harry,
England and Saint George,"
to "Liberté, Egal . . ."
but what's the word today?

It burned in the beginning
and cooled into the crust
of earth which man has mastered
and sold with winter words.

LINDA PASTAN:

The Ladybug

Ladybug, I have memorized your pattern,
Those spotted marks of miniature peacock.
You are to me like a mandarin red bead;
I have studied its animate mosaic
Till lifted from the stiff veined stems of old leaves,
Or from the frostless insides of window glass,
You are blown off the ends of children's fingers
Home to some I fear imaginary house,
Ablaze with perhaps imaginary flame.

Poem

As in a box within a box
I the dreamer watch the dream,
Falling I see the wingless flight,
Falling I trace the fall along
The curve of a descending scream,
Past fragmented jigsaw faces
This year's smile on last year's smiler,
Past the dreamer of the dream,
I, quiescent human streamer.

WILLIAM H. GASS:

The High Brutality of Good Intentions

> "The great question as to a poet or a novelist is, How does he feel about life? what, in the last analysis, is his philosophy?"
>
> —Henry James

"Art," Yeats wrote in his essay on "The Thinking of the Body," "bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body." Yet the world that we are permitted to touch and taste and hear and see in art, in Yeats' art as much as in any other, is not a world of pure Becoming, with the abstractions removed to a place safe only for philosophers; it is a world invested out of the ordinary with formal natures, with types and typicals, by abstractions and purest principles; invested to a degree which, in comparison with the real, renders it at times grotesque and always abnormal. It is charged with Being. Touching it provides a shock.

The advantage the creator of fiction has over the moral philosopher is that the writer is concerned with the exhibition of objects, thoughts, feelings and actions where they are free from the puzzling disorders of the real and the need to come to conclusions about them. He is subject only to those calculated disorders which are the result of his refusal, in the face of the actual complexities of any well-chosen "case," to take a stand. The moral philosopher is expected to take a stand. He is expected to pronounce upon the principles of value. The writer of fiction, in so far as he is interested in morals, rather than, for instance, metaphysics, can satisfy himself and the requirements of his art by the exposure of moral principle in the act, an exposure more telling than life because it is, although concrete, concrete in no real way—stripped of the irrelevant, the accidental, the incomplete—every bit of paste and hair and string part of the intrinsic nature of the article. However the moral philosopher comes by his conclusions, he does not generally suppose (unless he is also a theologian) that the world is ordered by them or that the coming together of feelings and intents or the issuance of acts or the flow of consequences, which constitute

the moral facts, was designed simply in order to display them.

It is the particular achievement of Henry James that he was able to transform the moral color of his personal vision into the hues of his famous figure in the carpet; that he found a form for his awareness of moral issues, an awareness that was so pervasive it invaded furniture and walls and ornamental gardens and perched upon the shoulders of his people a dove for spirit, beating its wings with the violence of all Protestant history; so that of this feeling, of the moving wing itself, he could make a *style*. This endeavor was both aided and hindered by the fact that, for James, art and morality were so closely twined, and by the fact that no theory of either art or morality had footing unless, previous to it, the terrible difficulties of vision and knowledge, of personal construction and actual fact, of, in short, the relation of reality to appearance had been thoroughly overcome. James' style is a result of his effort to master, at the level of his craft, these difficulties, and his effort, quite apart from any measure of its actual success with these things, brought to the form of the novel in English an order of art never even, before him, envisioned by it.

Both Henry James and his brother were consumed by a form of The Moral Passion. Both struggled to find in the plural world of practice a vantage for spirit. But William was fatally enmeshed in the commercial. How well he speaks for the best in his age. He pursues the saint; he probes the spiritual disorders of the soul; he commiserates with the world-weary and encourages the strong; he investigates the nature of God, His relation to the world, His code; he defends the possible immortality of the soul and the right to believe: and does all so skillfully, with a nature so sensitive, temperate and generous that it is deeply disappointing to discover, as one soon must, that the lenses of his mind are monetary, his open hand is open for the coin, and that the more he struggles to understand, appreciate, and rise, the more instead he misses, debases, and destroys.

> In the religion of the once-born the world is a sort of rectilinear or one-storied affair, whose accounts are kept in one denomination, whose parts have just the values which naturally they appear to have, and of which a simple algebraic sum of pluses and minuses will give the total worth. Happiness and religious peace consist in living on the plus side of the account. In the religion of the twice-born, on the other hand, the world is a double-storied mystery. Peace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and elimination of minuses from life. Natural good is not simply insufficient

> in amount and transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being. Cancelled as it all is by death if not by earlier enemies, it gives no final balance, and can never be the thing intended for our lasting worship.[1]

Even when William, in a passage not obviously composed with the bookkeeper's pen, makes a literary allusion, as here:

> Like the single drops which sparkle in the sun as they are flung far ahead of the advancing edge of a wave-crest or of a flood, they show the way and are forerunners. The world is not yet with them, so they often seem in the midst of the world's affairs to be preposterous . . .[2]

it turns out to be a covert reference to "getting and spending."

Henry James was certainly aware that one is always on the market, but as he grew as an artist he grew as a moralist and his use of the commercial matrix of analogy[3] became markedly satirical or ironic and his investigation of the human trade more self-conscious and profound until in nearly all the works of his maturity his theme is the evil of human manipulation, a theme best summarized by the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative:

> So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only.

Nothing further from pragmatism can be imagined, and if we first entertain the aphorism that though William was the superior thinker, Henry had the superior thought, we may be led to consider the final effect of their rivalry,[4] for the novels and stories of Henry James constitute the most searching criticism available of the pragmatic ideal of the proper treatment and ultimate worth of man. That this criticism was embodied in Henry James' style, William James was one of the first to recognize. "Your methods and my ideals seem the reverse, the one of the other," he wrote to Henry in a letter complaining about the

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[1] William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* Modern Library, New York, p. 163. God does a wholesale not a retail business, p. 484. The world is a banking house, p. 120. Catholic confession is a method of periodically auditing and squaring accounts, p. 126. Examples could be multiplied endlessly, not only in *The Varieties* but in all his work. In *The Varieties* alone consult pages: 28, 38, 39, 133, 134, 135, 138, 330, 331, 333, 340, 347, 429fn, 481, 482.

[2] *Ibid.,* p. 450.

[3] Mark Schorer's expression. "Fiction and the Matrix of Analogy," *The Kenyon Review,* XI, No. 4(1949). The commercial metaphor pervades James' work and has been remarked so frequently that it scarcely requires documentation.

[4] Leon Edel develops this theme in the first volume of his biography, *Henry James: The Untried Years, 1843-1870.*

"interminable elaboration" of *The Golden Bowl.* Couldn't we have, he asks, a "book with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigour and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in the style?"[5] Henry would rather have gone, he replies, to a dishonored grave.

The Portrait of a Lady is James' first fully exposed case of human manipulation; his first full-dress investigation, at the level of what Plato called "right opinion," of what it means to be a consumer of persons, and of what it means to be a person consumed. The population of James' fictional society is composed, as populations commonly are, of purchasers and their purchases, of the handlers and the handled, of the users and the used. Sometimes actual objects, like Mrs. Gereth's spoils, are involved in the transaction, but their involvement is symbolic of a buying and a being sold which is on the level of human worth (where the quality of the product is measured in terms of its responsiveness to the purchaser's "finest feelings," and its ability to sound the buyer's taste discreetly aloud), and it is for this reason that James never chooses to center his interest upon objects which can, by use, be visibly consumed. In nearly all of the later novels and stories, it is a human being, not an object, it is first Isabel Archer, then Pansy, who is the spoil, and it is by no means true that only the "villains" fall upon her and try to carry her off; nor is it easy to discover just who the villains really are.

Kant's imperative governs by its absence—as the hollow center. It is not that some characters, the "good" people, are busy being the moral legislators of mankind and that the others, the "bad" people, are committed to a crass and shallow pragmatism or a trifling estheticism; for were that the case *The Portrait* would be just another skillful novel of manners and James would be distinctly visible, outside the work, nodding or shaking his head at the behavior of the animals in his moral fable. He would have managed no advance in the art of English fiction. James' examination of the methods of human consumption goes too deep. He is concerned with all of the ways in which men may be reduced to the status of objects and because James pursues his subject so diligently, satisfying himself only when he has unravelled every thread, and because he is so intent on avoiding in himself what he has revealed as evil in his characters and exemplifying rather what

[5] Quoted by R.B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James,* 2 vols., Boston (1935), Vol. 1, p. 424.

he praises in Hawthorne who, he says, "never intermeddled,"[6] the moral problem of *The Portrait* becomes an esthetic problem, a problem of form, the scope and course of the action, the nature of the characters, the content of dialogue, the shape and dress of setting, the points-of-view, the figures of speech, the very turn and tumble of the sentences themselves directed by the problem's looked-for solution, and there is consequently no suggestion that one should choose up sides or take to heart his criticism of a certain society nor any invitation to discuss the moral motivations of his characters *as if* they were surrogates for the real.

The moral problem, moreover, merges with the esthetic. It is possible to be an artist, James sees, in more than paint and language, and in *The Portrait,* as it is so often in his other work, Isabel Archer becomes the unworked medium through which, like benevolent Svengali, the shapers and admirers of beautifully brought out persons express their artistry and themselves. The result is very often lovely, but it is invariably sad. James has the feeling, furthermore, and it is a distinctly magical feeling, that the novelist takes possession of his subject through his words; that the artist is a puppeteer; his works are the works of a god. He constantly endeavors to shift the obligation and the blame, if there be any, to another: his reflector, his reverberator, his sensitive gong. In *The Portrait* James begins his movement toward the theory of the point-of-view. The phrase itself occurs incessantly. Its acceptance as a canon of method means the loss of a single, universally objective reality. He is committed, henceforth, to a standpoint philosophy, and it would seem, then, that the best world would be that observed from the most sensitive, catholic, yet discriminating standpoint. In this way, the esthetic problem reaches out to the metaphysical. This marvelous observer: what is it he observes? Does he see the world as it really is, palpitating with delicious signs of the internal, or does he merely fling out the self-capturing net? James struggles with this question most obviously in *The Sacred Fount* but it is always before him. So many of his characters are "perceptive." They understand the value of the unmolded clay. They feel they know, as artists, what will be best for their human medium. They will *take up* the young lady (for so it usually is). They will *bring* her *out.* They will *do for* her; *make something of* her. She will be *beautiful* and *fine,* in short, she will inspire *interest, amusement,* and *wonder.* And their pursuit of the

[6] *The American Essays of Henry James,* ed. by Leon Edel, Vintage, New York (1956), "Nathaniel Hawthorne," p. 23.

ideally refractive medium parallels perfectly Henry James' own, except he is aware that his selected lens dare not be perfect else he will have embodied a god again, and far more obnoxious must this god seem in the body of a character than he did in the nib of the author's pen; but more than this, James knows, as his creations so often do not, that this manipulation is the essence, the ultimate germ, of the evil the whole of his work condemns, and it is nowhere more brutal than when fronted by the kindest regard and backed by a benevolent will.

The Portrait of a Lady, for one who is familiar with James, opens on rich sounds. None of his major motifs is missing. The talk at tea provides us with five, the composition of the company constitutes a sixth, and his treatment of the setting satisfies the full and holy seven. The talk moves in a desultory fashion ("desultory" is the repetitive word) and in joking tones ("That's a sort of joke" is the repetitive phrase) from health and illness, and the ambiguity of its value, to boredom, considered as a kind of sickness, and the ambiguity of its production.[7] Wealth is suggested as a cause of boredom, then marriage is proposed as a cure. The elder Touchett warns Lord Warburton not to fall in love with his niece, a young lady recently captured by his wife to be exhibited abroad. The questions about her are: has she money? is she interesting? The jokes are: is she marriageable? is she engaged? Isabel is the fifth thing, then—the young, spirited material. Lord Warburton is English, of course, while the Touchetts are American. Isabel's coming will sharpen the contrast, dramatize the confrontation. Lastly, James dwells lovingly on the ancient red brick house, emphasizing its esthetic appeal, its traditions, its status as a work of art. In describing the grounds he indicates, too, what an American man of money may do: fall in love with a history not his own and allow it, slowly, to civilize him, draw him into Europe. Lord Warburton is said to be bored. It is suggested that he is trying to fall in love. Ralph is described as cynical, without belief, a condition ascribed to his illness by his father. "He seems to feel as if he had never had a chance." But the best of the ladies will save us, the elder Touchett says, a remark made improbable by his own lack of success.

The structure of the talk of this astonishing first chapter foreshadows everything. All jests turn earnest, and in them, as in the aimless pattern of the jesters' leisure, lies plain the essential evil, for the

[7] Illness, in James' novels, either signifies the beautiful thing (the Minny Temple theme) or it provides the excuse for spectatorship and withdrawal, the opportunity to develop the esthetic sense (the Henry James theme).

evil cannot be blinked even though it may not be so immediately irritating to the eye as the evil of Madame Merle or Gilbert Osmond. There is in Isabel herself a certain willingness to be employed, a desire to be taken up and fancied, if only because that very enslavement, on other terms, makes her more free. She refuses Warburton, not because he seeks his own salvation in her, his cure by "interest," but rather because marriage to him would not satisfy her greed for experience, her freedom to see and feel and do. Neither Warburton nor Goodwood appeals as a person to Isabel's vanity. She is a great subject. She will make a great portrait. She knows it. Nevertheless Isabel's ambitions are at first naive and inarticulate. It is Ralph who sees the chance, in her, for the really fine thing; who sees in her his own chance too, the chance at life denied him. It is Ralph, finally, who empowers her flight and in doing so draws the attention of the hunters.

Ralph and Osmond represent two types of the artist. Osmond regards Isabel as an opportunity to create a work which will flatter himself and be the best testimony to his taste. Her intelligence is a silver plate he will heap with fruits to decorate his table. Her talk will be for him "a sort of served dessert." He will rap her with his knuckle. She will ring. As Osmond's wife, Isabel recognizes that she is a piece of property; her mind is attached to his like a small garden-plot to a deer park. But Ralph obeys the strictures *The Art of Fiction* was later to lay down. He works rather with the medium itself and respects the given. His desire is to exhibit it, make it whole, refulgent, round. He wants, in short, to make an image or to see one made—a portrait. He demands of the work only that it be "interesting." He effaces himself. The "case" is his concern. *The Portrait's* crucial scene, in this regard, is that between Ralph and his dying father. Ralph cannot love Isabel. His illness prevents him. He feels it would be wrong. Nevertheless he takes, he says, "a great interest" in his cousin although he has no real influence over her.

> "But I should like to do something for her . . . I should like to put a little wind in her sails . . . I should like to put it into her power to do some of the things she wants. She wants to see the world for instance. I should like to put money in her purse."

The language is unmistakable. It is the language of Iago. Ralph wants her rich.

> "I call people rich when they're able to meet the requirements of their imagination. Isabel has a great deal of imagination."

With money she will not have to marry for it. Money will make her free. It is a curious faith. Mr. Touchett says, "You speak as if it were for your mere amusement," and Ralph replies, "So it is, a good deal." Mr. Touchett's objections are serenely met. Isabel will be extravagant but she will come to her senses in time. And, Ralph says,

> ". . . it would be very painful to me to think of her coming to the consciousness of a lot of wants she should be unable to satisfy. . . ."
>
> "Well, I don't know . . . I don't think I enter into your spirit. It seems to me immoral."
>
> "Immoral, dear daddy?"
>
> "Well, I don't know that it's right to make everything so easy for a person." [8]
>
> "It surely depends upon the person. When the person's good, your making things easy is all to the credit of virtue. To facilitate the execution of good impulses, what can be a nobler act? . . ."
>
> "Isabel's a sweet young thing; but do you think she's so good as that?"
>
> "She's as good as her best opportunities . . ."
>
> "Doesn't it occur to you that a young lady with sixty thousand pounds may fall a victim to the fortune-hunters?"
>
> "She'll hardly fall a victim to more than one."
>
> "Well, one's too many."
>
> "Decidedly. That's a risk, and it has entered into my calculation. I think it's appreciable, but I think it's small, and I'm prepared to take it . . ."
>
> "But I don't see what good you're to get of it. . . ."
>
> "I shall get just the good I said a few moments ago I wished to put into Isabel's reach—that of having met the requirements of my imagination. . . ."

The differences between Gilbert Osmond and Ralph Touchett are vast, but they are also thin.

Isabel Archer is thus free to try her wings. She is thrown upon the world. She becomes the friend of Madame Merle, "the great round world herself": polished, perfect, beautiful without a fault, mysterious, exciting, treacherous, repellent, and at bottom, like Isabel, identically betrayed; like Isabel again, seeking out of her own ruin to protect Pansy, the new subject, "the blank page," from that same round world that is herself. It is irony of the profoundest sort that "good" and

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[8] A remark characteristic of the self-made man. In the first chapter, Mr. Touchett attributes Warburton's "boredom" to idleness. "You wouldn't be bored if you had something to do; but all you young men are too idle. You think too much of your pleasure. You're too fastidious, and too indolent, and too rich." Caspar Goodwood is the industrious suitor.

"evil" in their paths should pass so closely. The dark ambitions of Serena Merle are lightened by a pathetic bulb, and it is only those whose eyes are fascinated and convinced by surface who can put their confident finger on the "really good." Ralph Touchett, and we are not meant to miss the appropriateness of his name, has not only failed to respect Isabel Archer as an end, he has failed to calculate correctly the qualities of his object. Isabel is a sweet, young thing. She is not yet, at any rate, as good as her best opportunities. The sensitive eye was at the acute point blind. Ralph has unwittingly put his bird in a cage. In a later interview, Isabel tells him she has given up all desire for a general view of life. Now she prefers corners. It is a corner she's been driven to. Time after time the "better" people curse the future they wish to save with their bequests. Longdon of *The Awkward Age* and Milly Theale of *The Wings of the Dove* come immediately to mind. Time after time the better artists fail because their point-of-view is ultimately only *theirs,* and because they have brought the esthetic relation too grandly, too completely into life.

In the portrait of Fleda Vetch of *The Spoils of Poynton* James has rendered an ideally considerate soul. Fleda, a person of modest means and background, possesses nevertheless the true sense of beauty. She is drawn by her friend Mrs. Gereth into the full exercise of that sense and to an appreciation of the ripe contemplative life which otherwise might have been denied her. Yet Fleda so little awards the palm to mere cleverness or sensibility that she falls in love with the slow, confused, and indecisive Owen Gereth. Fleda furthermore separates her moral and her esthetic ideals. Not only does she refuse to manipulate others, she refuses, herself, to be manipulated. The moral lines she feels are delicate. She takes all into her hands. Everyone has absolute worth. Scruples beset and surround her and not even Mrs. Gereth's righteousness, the warmth of her remembered wrongs, can melt them through. The impatience which James generates in the reader and expresses through Mrs. Gereth is the impatience, precisely, of his brother: for Fleda to act, to break from the net of scruple and seize the chance. It would be for the good of the good. It would save the spoils, save Owen, save Mrs. Gereth, save love for herself; but Fleda Vetch understands, as few people in Henry James ever do, the high brutality of such good intentions. She cannot accept happiness on the condition of moral compromise, for that would be to betray the ground on which, ideally, happiness ought to rest. Indeed it would betray happiness itself, and love, and the people and their possessions

that have precipitated the problem and suggested the attractive and fatal price.

It is not simply in the organization of character, dialogue, and action that Henry James reveals The Moral Passion, nor is it reflected further only in his treatment of surroundings[9] but it represents itself and its ideal in the increasing scrupulosity of the style: precision of definition, respect for nuance, tone, the multiplying presence of enveloping metaphors, the winding around the tender center of ritual lines, like the approach of the devout and worshipful to the altar, these circumlocutions at once protecting the subject and slowing the advance so that the mere utility of the core is despaired of and it is valued solely in the contemplative sight. The value of life lies ultimately in the experienced quality of it, in the integrity of the given not in the usefulness of the taken. Henry James does not peer through experience to the future, through this future to the future futures, endlessly down the infinite tube. He does not find in today only what is needful for tomorrow. His aim is rather to appreciate and to respect the things of his experience and to set them, finally, free.

[9] When, for instance, in *The Portrait* Gilbert Osmond proposes to Isabel, the furnishings of the room in which their talk takes place seem to Osmond himself "ugly to distress" and "the false colours, the sham splendour . . . like vulgar, bragging, lying talk"—an obvious commentary by the setting on the action.

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